



Of Horse and Rider (Hearts Unlocked)

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Category: Historical

Description: Plans overheard, a bargain to devise but is it playing with fire?

In 1849 Mercer County, Kentucky, beautiful Clara Stanton loses her sight, freedom, and fiancé after a horse-riding accident.

In the throes of her desperation, her family leaves her to recover in the capable hands of an elderly widow while they travel to England without her.

New minister, Daniel Merrick, weary from scandal, is unwittingly led by blind Clara into the most important mission of his life.

But will she dare to soar beyond the limits those around her deem safe?

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Harrodsburg, Kentucky

Clara Stanton sank her teeth into a bright, apron-shined apple. Juice slid from her chin dripping onto her book. She rubbed the sticky drops away with her sleeves and arched her back. She hadn't noticed how hard her seat had become.

The August day had blown soft and pleasant all morning, bereft of the stifling heat that had plagued them most of the summer.

The air itself seemed to sigh relief. The breezes had carried her here, beneath the shade of the towering maple and within sight of Mother's rose garden.

Clara lowered her eyes to her novel once again.

Silly Miss Margaret! Who gets swept off her feet by the first gentleman that winks over the gentle swish of a fan?

She lowered the book and thought of her own engagement.

She closed her eyes to picture him. Any day now, Christian Grant would ask for her hand in marriage.

He spoke of it in every letter. Whispered of it each time they chanced to meet.

A true romance—not the mere fluff of novels.

She smiled. Mother would be very pleased.

Very pleased indeed. She closed the book and tossed it aside.

A good dose of Jane Austen, if you please.

Large, warm hands slipped over her eyes. “Guess who?”

She pried them away. Christian. “Mr. Grant. You are flirting in plain sight.” Her heart skipped a beat when her own eyes met his. “I didn’t know you were coming today.” She sunk willingly into the rich brown orbs.

His lips lifted into a warm smile. Dark hair spilled over his brow and his clean-shaven jaw sent her heart racing. He lifted a hand to touch the stray curl that hung behind her ear. “Couldn’t stay away.”

“You may have to ask Father before I talk you into an elopement,” she whispered.

“You will have the finest wedding in Kentucky, no doubt.” He took both of her hands in his and lifted her to her feet. The mindless novel slipped to the ground with the abandoned apple core.

“Really?” She didn’t care how eager she appeared.

“Your father and I have agreed to terms.” He smiled, standing straight and solid. “Good thing tobacco brings a fair price. These fields show great promise, on the other hand, if this had been a bad summer...” he shrugged his hands wide open. “You’d be my greatest loss.” He laughed.

As if their love could have anything to do with tobacco fields. She swatted his arm.

He pulled her close to his chest then set her back slightly. Gazed at her soberly, joking set aside. “You will agree to marry me?”

She nodded. "I thought this day would never come."

He slipped his hand into his pocket and lifted up a ring, a promise, between them. Emerald and sapphires caught the sun. Never had she seen such brilliant colors. Never would she again.

What once was real had become naught but a dream. Her world dimmed. It browned then blackened as the dark truth squeezed her heart empty of the happy memory. And she was alone.

Breath barely escaped the tight press in her chest. She swiped at her eyes, clawing, seeking to force away the murky, suffocating deep that never lifted, like the fog that enveloped the far away streets of her Grandmum's precious London.

She grunted and moaned awake from the drowning panic.

Blinked aware to ever-darkness. Endless night.

Her sister's voice whined close by, the words cutting her fully awake. "She's doing it again, Mother. If I have to lose more sleep because she can't get over it..."

Such a hurtful tone. Can't get over it ? Blindness. The word carried a snake's hiss at the end. Vile, repulsive.

Mother scuffled nearby. "Shush, Alice. You know what a bear your father is when awakened at such an hour."

Ropes beneath the mattress pulled as Clara turned on her side. The bed jostled as Mother jerked the blankets away from her stifling hot body, the humid night invading sweat-drenched sheets. She shuddered at the sudden, forced exposure.

“Clara.” Tension transferred from Mother’s long, tight fingers to her forearm—pain filled the tug forward.

Would she ever forgive her for the accident?

“Let me help you downstairs.” Kind words shaded with cruelty.

“Sleep on the couch so your sisters can get some rest.” She paused then added, “You’re not the only one in this house, you know. ”

Indeed. She needed to be kept far from the sensitive ears of her family. The guestroom was too close should she sink back into her constant dreams. Clara swung her feet over the bedside and landed on the cool, wooden floor. Someone rustled forward. Most likely Marie.

Strange how one so completely blind could be spun dizzy with the dreaming and the waking. As though a tea cup rested immobile in her hands, the liquid gyrating from the force of her spoon. Still, yet reeling.

“Madame, I will take her. You must be fresh for the party tomorrow, yes?”

“Thank you, Marie. You must take care to listen a little better,” she chided .

“Of course, Madame.” A bite laced her words. “May I bring you a cup of tea?”

Clara nearly answered, but the offer obviously hadn’t been for her.

“In two hours.” Her mother’s voice never lost its British accent, she practiced a clipped tone in fear of being mistaken for a common Southerner.

Lucy mumbled from her side of the room. “What’s going on?”

Alice whined again. “It’s Clara. Go back to sleep.”

“I’m sorry Alice. Sorry Lucy.” Clara’s apology fell limp. Her sisters simply didn’t understand.

Marie tossed a fringed wrap around Clara’s shoulders and led her out of the bedroom and down the stairs with one arm looped around her back. Slipping, she stumbled down a few steps and lurched grabbing Marie.

“Miss Clara.” Marie spat her words, leaving moisture prickles on her exposed skin. “You will break both our necks.”

Mother had this maid for no other reason than to stay in good style. Certainly not for her sweet temperament. If it were up to Clara, she’d send her back to France on the next ship. A slave wouldn’t dare be so impertinent.

She lost balance again and grabbed the banister like a lifeline.

Indeed, it was. A sturdy guide against the anchor of night.

Where was the sun? The fine words of a novel?

The loving words of her fiancé? Those around her had not been plunged into darkness as she was.

No escape. Odd woman out. She jerked free from Marie. “I will go myself.”

“Fine.” Marie withdrew her hands. “Break your own neck, perhaps the family will be less burdened, no?” Marie turned and stomped away. Back to her own comfortable bed.

If Mother knew of Marie's nasty behavior, would it matter? Clara sat on the next step and slowly slid down one, two...her fingers slid into a set trap—cold and beaded. She shook it off with an abrupt cry. No one came to her.

Her heart raced, wide awake now. Wait. It wasn't a trap.

She groped for what she'd flung away. Beads.

A necklace of some sort. Her fingers slid down each hard lump.

At the end was a cross. A small form stretched from point to point with Christ, visible to the touch, pulled toward agony.

This token for prayer lost on the stairs. Marie's rosary, undeniably.

For a moment, she allowed her fingers to linger on this forgotten form, suspended in humiliation. Too much pain. She turned her mind from it, set the beads aside. Marie could find them on her own.

When she finally reached the bottom step, she stood.

The couch would be in the library. After the breakfast room, beyond the morning parlor, behind the dining room—just follow the columns.

How many times had she been reminded how simple everything was.

She massaged her pounding temples with one hand and knelt to the ground.

She'd have to scoot there. Sometimes Lewis left the cellar door open for cool air to circulate the house.

She'd have to move slowly, gauging the thick dips in the shoe molding that skirted the walls, careful not to fall into the cool, spidery abyss.

Perhaps her family would be better off if she did.

As Marie said. Maybe she'd be better off too.

She resorted to hands and knees, like the cat she pretended to be when she was a child. The wild freedom of girlhood and her current captivity wrestled together as she inched forward. Just breathe. Her nightgown tightened against her knees. She shifted and fell hard on her elbows. Ouch.

A gentle grunt sounded down the hallway. "I gets you Miz Clara."

"Lewis." Her stomach flopped at being seen. "I should not have sent Marie away."

"Don't you come no further. Mind I lift y'?" He didn't wait for an answer. Old, sinuous arms enclosed her, held her fast to his chest. His big heart thrummed. "You comin' ta sneak Jenny's cookies?" He chuckled.

"No, no cookies." Gone were her jests of whether or not a slave could be seen in the darkness. He could see her, and she was grateful. "I am to sleep on the couch."

"A couch a fine place to rest."

He carried her to the library and set her on the long horsehair and silk couch as gently as mamma did her teacup among fine company. "Thank you, Lewis." She swiped at an errant tear. "Don't eat them all. You know how mad Jenny gets."

She yawned. Sleep had been difficult after she woke from the accident, so desperate was her mind and soul to see again. Perhaps no dreams would be best. If only the

vividness had been real. But dreams came as they wished with no regard to her pain.

Lewis draped a soft coverlet across her. She buried her face into the back of the couch.

“G’night, Miz Clara.” His heavy steps clunked down the wide hall.

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Clara reached into her nightgown and lifted the engagement ring that hung from a long gold strand.

She rested it on the flat of her palm and touched the stones.

Remembering. Would she ever see herself again?

Or would she have to rely on someone someday years hence to announce that her hair had changed from brown to white?

Her finger grazed the smooth center of the ring. What of his many promises?

I will do anything for you, Clara. I will cross the sea and back. I promise to be a good husband to you. I promise we will have a good life. I promise...

You need not cross the sea for me. I'd rather have you by my side, silly man !

Where was he? How long had it been? Day and night were alike, and she knew not how many had passed. Her parents had told her very little. It was always the same, wait for the doctor. Listen to the doctor. Wait until the bruises cleared and the bandage removed. Wait.

Her parents and sisters continued to do as they pleased.

Nothing had changed around them. Parties had been planned and attended.

Callings and teas, paid and served. Without her.

Never consulted, never invited. The otherness was excruciating.

Would she really want to be seen in this state? ‘Of course not,’ she’d been told.

The old doctor that had examined her said such activity would aggravate her weary brain. What could be worse than what she already suffered?

Her eyelids flickered down. She stroked the ring and remembered. The day, the hour, the fall...

Wind and speed flung hair into her eyes as she bounced on the back of a deep brown Morgan, trying to keep up with Father and Christian.

How grand they looked on their mounts. The earlier rainfall had filled the trees with diamonds that sparkled like her engagement ring, as though the earth itself celebrated her news.

Father wanted to show off his new hunting stand. All he wanted to do besides grow tobacco was hunt. Without a second thought, he would drag Christian away from her into the deep woods.

They’d jumped the low stone fence. She would too. Why not? Christian jumped back again and galloped to face her.

He called out, “Catch up with me, Clara!”

She kicked her horse’s side and leaned inward.

His horse sped back to her and made a circle around hers. Too close, she failed to see the thick stone fence. Hooves and legs smashed forward. She’d been tossed into the depths of a nightmare.

CLARA SAT IN A RIGID ladder-back chair with a rank towel soaked in some sharp-smelling medicinal soup. Her eyes smarted and dripped unwarranted tears. Surely enough remedies had been tried? Mother would allow the slaves to dose her with their own concoctions. Of course she would.

Jenny plunked a spoon onto the wooden square table in the kitchen. Rising steam moistened her chin. Hot porridge?

A large apron had been hastily tucked within her clothes. She'd never get used to being pushed and prodded in the direction someone else chose for her. Humiliating. Treated like a child.

Jenny simmered. "I'll nevah get the cakes done in time."

Clara reached for the spoon, but Jenny plugged it into her hand.

"Like havin' another baby 'round here."

She felt her face redden.

"Like I don't have enough to do with that big dinner comin' up."

Clara laid her spoon down, appetite gone.

"I's sorry, Miz Clara. Don't mind me, I'm a headless chicken today."

Clara stifled a laugh. Jenny was so tiny, it wouldn't do to lose her head as well. She was easy to forgive.

"Where did my cookies run off to?" The back door opened and slammed. "Lewis! I gots me rollin' pin with your name on it!"

Clara lifted her spoon again and tested the perimeters of the bowl, swirling what was no doubt, oatmeal, despite the pungent scent of ham, biscuits, and gravy prepared for the healthier members of her family. How she wished to join them. Did they even miss her?

Her sisters' voices layered upon each other as they drifted from the dining room.

“England at last!” Alice squealed.

Father's voice muffled a long affirmative.

Mamma's accent heightened. “We must go to France first...new clothes...”

Lucy laughed. “Remember the man in Grandmum's opera box the last time we were there?”

Clara smiled too. Poor man. Not overly discerning, he'd been smitten with all three sisters at once, determined to capture one of them as his bride before they sailed a week hence for America.

She'd only been sixteen, Alice fourteen—and Lucy barely thirteen.

That was three years ago. And now they had most certainly matured into young women.

Perhaps they could meet Christian in Europe?

He had once mentioned an impending trip to Germany on the day of their engagement.

She'd suggested waiting for their honeymoon.

Did he know how she fared? Perhaps he had found a famous doctor there who could care for her.

Cure her. A smile crept across her face, daydreaming of his heroic efforts.

He would do anything for her. He had promised.

She threw off the reeking towel and rose from the table, excitement welling up.

Hope was a far better medicine! She lost her balance and reached for the table.

Her palm hit the edge of the bowl and oatmeal crashed to the floor—hot goo plopped thickly over her slipper.

At least it was better than the horse droppings she'd plunged her foot into the day before.

Clara sat waiting. Helpless. Jenny lost no time cleaning up for her.

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Daniel Merrick sat before the chairmen of his church. He'd been invited to a hot supper but instead cold inquisition was on the menu. While homemade aromas scented the air, Daniel doubted he would enjoy a bite tonight.

Mr. Hopkins had given his side of the story, and now, all eyes bored into him. Daniel spoke through clenched teeth. "I did nothing. Those women connived against me."

The man's glare could burn down a house. "We know good and well what men are capable of, both minister and tradesman alike."

"The girl threw herself at me. I wanted none of it. I would have run like Joseph, but," he gestured, "she knotted her hands around my neck." He rubbed the spot. "Her vulture mother was there a moment later. What was I to do?"

"You say a very sick woman, whom you wrongly call a mere "girl" rose out of her weakened state and was able to keep you pinned in place?"

Mr. East lifted his hand. "Hopkins, give the man a chance. Let's not accuse him yet."

"I didn't say she pinned me in place." He said through gritted teeth. "I was trying to get her grasping hands away from my neck. See, her fingernails left scratches." Daniel turned his collar back. No response.

Hopkins continued. "The story made news on the streets. In the papers, here, I have one." He unfolded the newspaper and pointed to the condemning words.

"It says, 'Reverend Merrick of the acclaimed Archibald Methodist Episcopal Church

fairly ruined the reputation of one Effiene Griscomb while on an ecclesiastical visit. Miss Griscomb, known to be ill for some time, will not long be known as spinster. The good Reverend denies any wrongdoing.”

Mr. Henries wagged his aged, knotty finger. “What kind of news is that? You know better than to get facts from the social column. We must go straight to the source, which is why Reverend Merrick is here tonight.” He nodded to Daniel and offered an encouraging smile.

Mr. Wallace smacked the table, jarring the cups. “A young woman’s reputation has been ruined. The fact has spread all over New York, greatly reducing her chance for happiness and marriage.” He pointed. “All because Reverend Merrick was careless with his affections.”

Mr. Crandall snickered. “Aw, haven’t we all been careless when we were young lads?”

Mr. Stonington glanced up from the newspaper he’d borrowed from Hopkins. “Not careless enough to end up in the news. That’s sheer stupidity.”

Daniel fumed. “I have no affection for her, nor was I careless. I fail to see why I should suffer for Mrs. Griscomb’s underhanded ways. Come now, gentlemen. I think we all know how she plots and schemes within the church.”

Stonington nodded. “Aye, Reverend Merrick. Enough plotting to hire a full-time gardener and reroof the church. Among other improvements, which I believe I’ve heard you mention with admiration.”

So, it came down to that? From their perspective it came down to a choice between his truth and her money. He’d been cautious, as warned by his seminary professors. A man in his position had higher rules to follow. Just so, but truth was truth .

“If I was foolish in any regard, it was to allow Mrs. Griscomb to guide me to Miss Effie’s chamber to administer sacred communion. I should simply have left the bread and wine on the tea tray in the hall when I realized we’d be alone.” Daniel could kick himself.

Wallace huffed. “I understand that you are upset, son, but let’s try to be reasonable. And compassionate. A man like yourself could use a wife anyway. Miss Griscomb might be a bit faint, but her health is improving and I’ve no doubt her fine blood line and all that goes with it might cheer you.”

Daniel made a face. “Are you telling me I should marry that vixen?”

Hopkins glared again. “You dare defame the name of a good girl.”

“I assure you, she was far from honorable.” Daniel spat the words. This group of men, save a few, didn’t want the cold truth. They cared only about keeping the church pockets brimming with old Griscomb money.

As was his way, East filled the frustrated pause. “Whether you did what Mrs. Griscomb claims or not, we’ve a serious situation on our hands. It requires action, or our esteemed church and her minister will be the laughingstock of New York.”

Daniel shook his head. Didn’t they know? Christians could be persecuted, laughed at—for Christ’s sake. “What kind of action?”

Always quick with the bottom line. Hopkins answered. “Marry her or leave.”

East held his hand out again. “Now, let’s not be so cold-hearted. Sometimes a man will find himself in a web he didn’t tangle. Maybe this’ll just blow over.”

“I sincerely doubt that, East,” Hopkins said.

Daniel stood and planted both hands on the table.

“I will leave you with my own proposition. Find it in the goodness of your hearts to believe me. But if you still cannot let truth win out, I will leave my post willingly.” He felt their stares.

“But bear in mind, I am also responsible for a widowed mother and siblings. Miss Griscomb will have done more damage than she realizes. I pity her. I ask you, at the very least, do not allow me to go without a clean reference letter.”

The men sat in thought while Daniel’s head pounded. Of all the stupid things to happen...

The much-wrinkled Mr. Trent cleared his throat and smoothed his hands flat across the table as though sweeping away the problem. “You need a fresh start.”

“Pardon?”

“I have still some acquaintances in the Southern Convention.” He tapped his fingers on the polished wood. “How do you feel about living in Kentucky?”

It was over. They wanted the money. And they weren’t only sending him away, they were making him hop wide the fence of a denominational split whose arguments still loudly reverberated arguments among those in seminary and beyond.

A few years ago, the Methodist church had broken in two.

Then, as now, profit had caused the schism.

Slavery, the back on which fortune had been delivered.

While those within his church sought to do right on one hand, on the other, they'd failed completely. Did wealth always carry sway?

His moment had passed. Servants filled the table with platters of food. He hardly knew what. Plates were filled and the chairmen moved on to more agreeable topics. Daniel shook Trent's hand, and took his leave. He had no appetite.

DANIEL ROLLED A SHIRT and stuffed it atop his brimming trunk. He glanced around his childhood room, looking for anything he might have missed.

His sister, Francine, thumbed through a book. "Take this one too."

"I have too many as it is, and besides, this one's your favorite." He shoved the trunk lid down and snapped the lock in place. "You keep it."

She smiled. "I will be too busy for pleasure reading, you know. I'll be grading papers and wiping runny noses."

He pressed it back into her hands. "School's not forever."

"But..." She seemed to panic slightly, her smile wavered. "Daniel. There's something I must tell you," she whispered.

Daniel's two younger brothers ran up the stairs and flung open the door. "Mom says to hurry. She's got your lunch tin ready."

"Carry my trunk down, will you?"

"Aw," they said in unison.

"You're right. Only the strongest men could handle this job." Daniel bent to grasp

both ends.

“We’ll do it,” said fifteen-year-old Harper. He grabbed one end, twelve-year-old Elias the other. They grimaced. “What’s in here, Sally May’s biscuits?”

Francine put her hands on her hips. “Don’t let her hear you say that.”

Harper and Elias seemed overjoyed at his departure. They had secretly gambled for room rights last night thinking he couldn’t hear them.

Daniel winked at Francine. “Yes, dear sister. This room shall do very well for you. Looks over Market Street and has a perfect window for a suitor to croon beneath...ouch!” Elias stepped on his toe.

She smiled. “No suitors, Daniel. I doubt there ever will be.”

He raised his brows up and down. “Don’t forget about Crawley. Stared at you a good ten minutes last Sunday. You know I can see everything from the pulpit. ”

“Daniel!” Mother called from the bottom of the stairs. Her feet thumped upward.

Francine pointed to the book, opened it to reveal a letter inside, shut it again, and slipped downstairs.

Some thirty minutes later, Daniel tapped the train’s rain-speckled window with his finger.

His mother looked back and forth from the platform, but failed to see him through the glass.

A flood of people welled up around her. A group of well-dressed men tipped their

hats to elegant ladies and received parting curtsies.

His mother looked like a simple violet amongst so much pomp.

Her bonnet would never be graced by plumes or such, not that she couldn't have them.

Once, she could have had twelve such bonnets if she wanted.

But no, she desired simplicity. If his sister were to have any excess ornamentation on gowns or bonnets, she had to spend many nights fireside learning the crafts that most families of their standing could buy with cash.

His father had been no different. As the eldest son, Daniel had to shovel his fair share of coal. His hands were not soft like the others in his private school. By day, he fenced and learned Latin. By evening, he carved and sanded new walking canes for the poor.

He kept the last one he and his father had made together.

The cane his father would never use in his dotage would be used for Daniel's, Lord willing.

He didn't plan on dying an early death. His inheritance, long spent, saw him through seminary.

His new salary would hardly keep them afloat.

He'd squirreled away some savings and prayed nothing would happen that he'd have to use it.

But his brothers were still so young. Still needed an education.

And Francine's income was less than half of his, no matter that she worked just as hard.

He closed his eyes. It wasn't fair. He didn't deserve to be sent away as a rogue. He'd turned the situation over and over in his mind. What could he have done differently ?

He remembered how Effiene's eyes had locked onto his with strange longing.

In truth, he thought her in pain. He drew close—she'd seemed so weak, near death perhaps.

All he knew in that moment was that she shouldn't feel alone in the world.

He sought to bring calming comfort, instead, her hands had suddenly locked behind his neck and jerked him to her lips. He swiped his mouth at the memory.

The train lurched forward. He must think on other things. Many hours of track ahead. Too bad his sister's letter had been locked within the trunk. In the rush to catch the train, he mindlessly packed the book.

Perhaps she confesses her affinity for Mr. Crawley after all. He laughed and shook his head. He would miss his sister. Miss the grandness of New York.

But without a doubt, he felt the call to be the arrow of his parent's quiver, meant to be sent into flight. That was the story he would share in any case. Who was he kidding? This kind of flight belonged to the guilty. Forced and bitter.

His mother, sister, and brothers would have to live on what pittance he could send and not off the overflowing tithes of Archibald Methodist Episcopal.

Hours, towns, and farmlands later, the train chugged into his final stop. He stepped down and gazed about him. New York was far, far away and the hazy sky above seemed endless.

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Clara held the inkpot steady with one hand and slowly dipped the tip of her quill pen with the other. She only needed to touch the surface. No way of knowing if the pot was full or near empty. Listening carefully, she heard two drips fall to the parchment. She had to try, no matter a few spots.

Dear Christian ,

What should she say? He was obviously staying away. To give her time to heal and become accustomed to the changes. Still surely he must know she needed him—and him alone? She continued writing, trying to see the words in her mind.

Father says you have not gone to Germany. I am glad.

She dipped her pen again. Had she run out of ink on the word “glad”?

If she tested with her finger, it would smear.

She dipped again, straining against hope.

Too far. Ink sopped between her fingers.

Setting the quill down, she pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve, wiped the mess, and cleaned her pen. There, a fresh start.

Please come to me as soon as you can.

Your faithful,

Clara

She tossed the quill aside and blew across the letter. As soon as it was dry, she'd ask Father to mail it.

"Clara. What are you doing?" Mother's voiced pinched the air.

"Composing a letter." She did not turn in her mother's direction. Why bother? She couldn't see her anyway .

"You really should let Lucy or Alice help you."

"It is private." She didn't want their help. Her sisters cared little for her situation. Indeed, they'd whispered only last night that they were glad it hadn't happened to them. They were safe. Father had forbidden the Stanton women to ever ride horses again, side-saddle or otherwise.

"Well, that can't be helped my dear, can it? Not in your situation." Her mother placed a hand on her arm.

Strange. When had she crossed the room? "What am I to do, Mother?" She aimed her mouth toward the words.

"You can behave, for a start."

"Behave? Mother, you speak to me as an infant when I am nineteen and engaged."

A lavender-perfumed wrist reached around her face. "Is this a letter to Christian?" She felt the paper slip out of her grasp.

"As you see."

“Hardly legible.”

Clara stood. “Perhaps I should do better with a pencil.”

“Oh, Clara. Look at the front of your dress. You’ve ruined it. Absolutely ruined it.”

“You forget I cannot look. Cannot see.” Clara bent her head down and felt a damp stain on her bodice.

“Your skirts are spotted all over.” The tsking echoed. “Shame, for it was good linen.”

“Please write to Christian for me. Tell him to come.” It was so little to ask.

“When he is ready, dear, he will come. Now, you must dress for dinner. I’ll call Marie to help you.”

“I don’t want Marie. Send me Jenny instead.” She paused. “Please.”

“Jenny’s in the kitchen. Marie is much more adept at lacing.”

LUCY AND ALICE GIGGLED . The Mayor and his family were coming to dine. His twin sons, Silas and Charlie, would drift between flirting and torturing them when their parents weren’t looking. They could hardly wait.

Clara steadied herself at the bed post as Marie laced the corset level by level, tug by tug. With a final push to the middle of her back, Clara’s waist was cinched as far as possible. She could scarcely breathe, let alone eat.

Marie made a final knot. “Miss had better be careful with inkpots in the future.”

Lucy and Alice giggled again. Clara felt a puff of air as a body fell across the bed.

Alice sighed. "Writing a love letter can be rather dangerous, you know. One could stab oneself in the heart!" More muffled laughter.

Lucy gently pressed a comb into Clara's hands. "I daresay I would do anything to win him back if I were you."

"Win him back? We are to be married." Doubt suddenly attacked.

"Christian Grant hasn't been here since, you know. I thought maybe..." Uncertainty tinged her voice.

What? He hadn't been to see her after the accident?

Even once? Why? Hurt built upon hurt. "He and father made an agreement. He gave me his promise." Others said she'd been confused for many days.

But she had never forgotten about Christian.

Did he think so? How could he? She must reassure him. For now, she had a dinner to survive.

Clara sat perfectly poised. It was difficult, however, to hold her head high, knowing that the dinner guests were likely staring.

Taking a quiet breath, She reached for the wine glass, its cool exterior caught within her hand.

An achievement. She'd been practicing for this dinner for weeks. Not a drop spilled .

She had also been instructed not to fuss if a guest wanted to help her. Pity was a gift, Mother said, and to be accepted without protest.

As a result, the generous mayor heaped an overabundance on her plate, some of which fell onto the table cloth and then coated her dessert fork. The goo-covered handle would not be pleasant when Jenny served the pudding.

“Have some salt, my dear,” he offered.

How much ended up on the roasted chicken? “Thank you,” she nodded at her right.

Father cleared his throat. “We will travel to the specialist in Louisville. He’ll cure our Clara for sure, and no doubt.” Assents rose around the table.

The mayor’s wife gasped. “That will be lovely, dear. It’s what we all wish for, indeed we do. Being sightless in Europe would simply be unthinkable.”

Cure? Then her parents had hope. For the first time since her accident, joy filled her heart. A cure, Christian Grant, Europe, and a wedding. All waiting for her. She reached for the wine again, but missed the stem. The thin crystal cracked against her plate. Oh no.

She reached to straighten the glass when a large hand stopped her bare arm. “Careful, Miss Stanton. You might cut yourself.”

“Her food’s ruined, Jenny. Fetch another plate.” Mother clarified the situation for every guest.

“Yes ma’am.”

The Mayor’s boys whispered, but she heard them anyway. “Look, Silas, an Egyptian plague.”

“I see it. A bloody Nile River in those mashed potatoes.”

The mayor rumbled, “Shush, boys.”

Alice giggled. Mother gently coughed her tale-tell signal. But Clara didn’t care who laughed about her plight. As long as there was hope .

A while later, the men smoked cigars on the west side of the porch while Mother, the mayor’s wife, and Clara reclined in wicker rocking chairs.

The others played badminton nearby. Laughter rose to the robin’s nests, and Clara pretended she was among them, could see again, exultant in losing her breath and making a light hit.

She smiled. Soft tones carried somewhere beside her.

“What of Mr. Grant? What’s to be done about him?”

“To tell you the truth, we don’t know.” Her mother had tried to keep her voice low—for her. Why did they think she could not hear? No other senses had been lost.

“Can’t say I blame him if he acquits.”

“Yes. It would be difficult for a man like him to put up with a life like that. Herbert and I have considered some options.”

Clara’s smile faded into a shudder. “A life like what?” She turned to where she thought they faced.

“Never you mind, dear. Lewis? Come here. I want you to take Clara inside. Have Marie put her to bed. This evening has been too much excitement for her. My dear, your complexion looks dreadfully pallid.”

“But I’m not ready to go in.” The admonition to behave haunted her.

“No arguing. We want you well.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Clara stood, reluctant to leave the soft September breezes. “Good night,” she said. The walnut grove behind the house had no doubt begun to drop their spotted yellow leaves. How much blue chicory still bloomed by the roadside?

“You jest put yer arm right here, missy. I leads you in.”

Clara caught her ankle on the rocking chair and pretended the stabbing didn’t hurt. They crossed the long wide porch and stepped through the threshold.

“Don’t take me to Marie yet, Lewis. I want to have a cup of tea.” Wanted to make one decision for herself tonight .

“In the parlor, miss? The missus be sure to see you there.”

“I’ll take it in the kitchen.”

“Yes, miss. Jenny’ll brew it fine.”

Lewis guided her through the swinging kitchen door. Like magic, a chair scooted in front of her. Hands gently pushed her downward. She felt so babied, it was embarrassing. At least Alice and Lucy’s lack of mercy gave her some independence.

“Miss Clara’s wantin’ tea.”

Jenny ranted. “You know I be elbow deep in hot water. Why a body’s gotta use so many dishes for a meal, I’ll nevah understand. My chilluns eat it all standin’ up. All they gots to do is wash hands.” Her voice raised. “Lewis, get outta that cookie jar, I

swear...”

“They’s for Miss Clara. She gettin’ too tiny.”

Clara shifted in her chair.

Jenny set the tea in front of her and placed her hands at the cup and handle. Sweetly, kindly. She inhaled aromatic Darjeeling, her favorite.

Lewis tapped her hand and she opened her palm. He doled out the cookies. “There now.”

She nibbled one and savored molasses and raisin crumbles.

Soon, very soon, all would be set aright again.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

Daniel covered his nose with a large starched handkerchief and blew.

Drat! What timing. His first day meeting the families of Harrodsburg, Kentucky and his nose was cherry-ripe.

Mr. George would knock on his door at any moment.

He'd offered to trot along with him as he made the rounds—and, most likely take notes.

He blew again, then sneezed. "Merciful heaven, God within it, hear my sneeze? Want me humbled, do You? Of course, You do." Daniel adjusted the plain, white collar and buttoned his black coat. Donned an equally plain but new black hat, a low affair. No need to add to his height.

But ach! His red nose would cause giggles from the children who played near the hearth while they stumbled through the verses their mother would make them recite.

He blinked. And sneezed again. He threw off his hat and ducked his entire head into a washbasin full of water, bubbling till he could stand it no longer. Might not help, but what could it hurt? Jerking a towel from the rack, he roughly dried his face.

"God be praised, I will not sneeze again." He stood still and took a deep breath.

The expected knock sounded. His chaperone had arrived.

"Ah. Right." He shoved his hat back on and ran downstairs to the foyer. The cook

had already answered the door.

Mr. George pointed a crooked finger and swirled it at him. “What are you forgetting, my boy?”

Daniel checked for his jacket, hat—shoes still on his feet. “Ah...oh yes. I am quite stupid today,” he grinned. He ran upstairs and retrieved his Bible.

Mr. George pointed next door. “First off, I reckon you’d like to see our church.”

He’d only glanced at the structure when Mr. George opened the parsonage for him the night before. Too tired to care or notice. The gothic revival building stood a decent size as churches go. Well-constructed, windows aplenty. Its spire above the bell tower ever pointing skyward.

“Churchwomen donated the silver to make th’ bell. Got a right pretty ring to ‘t.”

Daniel peered up and down Chiles Street soaking in the sight. A busy place for certain, but nowhere near New York.

Everyone seemed busy within and around the scant town buildings. A few streets away from the parsonage, Mr. George knocked at a cabin door.

They were met with a stout, dark haired woman whose thin smile bore the only pleasure she had at seeing them.

“Ethel, this be the new preacher.”

She dipped her head as though she meant to curtsy, “She be waitin’ long for a parson.”

The darkness of the place was only interrupted by two small windows that flanked the table near the hearth. A sour scent mixed with roasted coffee filled his senses. Often, he'd been led directly to the sick. How many nights had he sat by their bedsides providing respite for the family?

"Bridge," grunted Mr. George. "Mrs. Bridge."

"Mrs. Bridge, I am glad to make your acquaintance. He waited for an answer. Only silence. The woman tucked beneath the quilts seemed to stare off into another world. What did she see above those dark rafters ?

Her chin shook within the ruffled layers of her day cap. "Why should I not like the Psalms?"

"I imagine you should like the Psalms." He glanced at Mr. George.

The old gentleman cleared his throat. "I daresay a readin' is in order."

Of course. "Have you a favorite or will Psalm 91 do?"

She nodded.

Thankfully, he'd been reminded to bring the Good Book.

He slipped his finger about center into the well-worn pages and propped it on his knee.

"Ah..." how had he done it? This was not his Bible but a book fresh from the shop.

He lowered the volume to his lap the spine hidden. Mr. George must never find out.

“Yes, of course Psalm 23 is very nice as well,” He said. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

Daniel gracefully stumbled through the day—taken to so many bedsides, he wondered if the entire town was ailing. He’d never quoted Psalm 23 so often in his life.

The following day, a dozen of Harrodsburg’s finest families were broadly complimented while the children were admonished for fidgeting.

Their stiff parlors made his collar itch. Especially at the McPherson’s. Their well-laid plans for his entertainment, even more so. Often he’d been forced to sit through such unfortunate attempts at “art.” This was not what he signed up for when he went into the ministry.

As if the presence of a minister made a dance somehow purer.

He had not thought tiny Harrodsburg culturally adept enough to have a ball.

But this town offered more than he realized.

Graham Springs Hotel rose a stately presence near town and offered miracle spring water to ward off diseases, bowling, and—dancing.

He had already been coerced into one by that Mrs. McPherson. Promises, however, were promises.

Even Mr. George had thought it quite a successful invitation. Daniel chafed at being obligated by his role into such duties. Thank God, it wasn’t for a month yet. Truth be told, McPherson’s daughter seemed as vain as those he’d left behind. But that wasn’t very noble or charitable of him.

“Have you been to the Stanton farm? Refined Mrs. McPherson raised gold rimmed pince nez to her eyes, her inspection incomplete. Did she hope to find answers on his lapel? The cut of his coat?

“I have not yet had the pleasure of that acquaintance.”

“A fine brick house with fields behind it. But two miles away. I daresay you must hasten there.” She leaned forward and whispered, “Darkest tragedy. Of course, their eldest daughter always had a wild streak. She’s blind now. Her wildness is tamed now, that’s all there is to it.”

Daniel took in a breath of fresh air, thankful to be out of that particular parlor.

How people enjoyed sharing sordid details, but only in the most spiritual tones.

Wild streaks often accompanied tragic consequences.

Hadn’t those moral lessons been present in all of his children’s books?

Daniel’s stomach sloshed an ocean of tea as he strolled beside Mr. George.

If it hadn’t been his first visitation, he would have been able to decline so much tea.

And He’d have another day like it ahead of him tomorrow.

“The eldest Stanton girl—is she as Mrs. MacPherson says? Wild?”

Mr. George’s overgrown eyebrows lifted. “Don’t rightly know about all that. Horse threw her. At’s all there is to it.” He smiled. “Here, now. The McPherson’s hold lavish parties. You’ll get to see what kind of catch lives in our pond, eh?”

Oh no. “I’m not sure...”

“Mhmm.” The old man wouldn’t stop grinning. “Caught my lady at such a party.” He jabbed a big thumb into his chest .

Daniel cast his eyes to the clouds for help. “Fishers of men, you know.”

“But when the fisherman casts his baited hook, he cannot guess who’ll bite. Have you got your sermon ready?”

“I wrote it two weeks ago.”

“Mrs. Ramshaw grows a bit of mint by her front gate,” he pointed towards a hill, behind the parsonage.

“That yellow clapboard up past Fort Hill to the right. See there? Up a’hind them old fort buildings.

Pinch you some mint—what’s left of it. Helps the stomach and clears a body’s head.
” He tapped his temple.

“I’m not nervous.” He’d preached hundreds of times.

“No?” He tapped the book weighing down his pocket. “Just make sure it’s the Holy Bible you’re a-preachin’ from come Sunday.”

Not a subtle man, Mr. George. Daniel smirked as he pulled his small golden watch from his vest. Already four o’clock?

The brick parsonage stood at the edge of the street, though not as large as he was accustomed.

At least it had enough windows. He pushed open the iron gate and let it clang behind him.

He stepped into the front room—his shirts and stockings hung on racks out in the open for all to see. Delightful. What business had cook getting into his trunk? He had certainly not hired a maid.

“Mrs. Kilgore?” He stepped quickly to the kitchen. She wasn’t there. Chopped onion covered the cutting board, a carrot awaited the same fate.

Laughter floated downstairs. Someone else was with her. He raced up the stairs and flung open his bedroom door.

“Excuse me.” His face flushed.

Mrs. Kilgore and a much younger dressed-in-pink female stood over his trunk. The young one held a photograph. His.

“If you insist on doing my laundry madam, I insist it be dried in the privacy of the kitchen. As for rifling through my things...”

“Sir, we weren’t rifling.” The old woman wrung her hands. “We was just givin’ you a hand, ain’t we, Susanna?”

The one called Susanna held out her hand, her chin jutted forward. “Welcome to Harrodsburg, Reverend Merrick.” Her southern accent sweetened the scene, guiltling him with her proper manners. But a woman shouldn’t be in his bed chamber. No matter what. He’d paid too high a price already.

“Thank you,” fell limp from his lips. He took the photograph from her hands. “I appreciate your efforts, I assure you I can take care of this on my own.”

“She is very beautiful.”

“Indeed, I have never found her compare.” Was it wrong to mislead her? It was true. His dear sister held a dear place in his heart. And it was true. He hadn’t met anyone with such freshness of spirit that wasn’t already married.

Susanna’s smile wilted. “I have trespassed too long, I see.” She lowered into a curtsy. He responded with a bow.

“Miss...”

“Gray.” Without another word, she turned on her heel and left.

Mrs. Kilgore worried her handkerchief between her hands. “I am s’ sorry, you must pardon Susanna and me. We’re used to doing everything for the old minister.” She backed herself through the doorway.

He doubted the story. “Well, I ah, thank you for your trouble...” In pink dress clothes? Hardly. Snooping, more like.

“You’re the master of this parsonage now, sir. I’ll be tendin’ to supper.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

Daniel glanced around. His books lay in piles around the bed. They should have been arranged in the study. He leaned Francine's photograph atop a chest of drawers .

Her letter, where was it? What book had she been holding? The fog of an endless journey and an over-long day visiting fell upon him. But the letter might be too important to ignore.

The book she had been holding had a green spine with gilded pages. She had slipped it into Pascal's Pensees . He bent down to the book pile and ran his fingers down the spines. It was second from the top. He pulled the book from its place, jumped onto his bed, and tossed his shoes to the floor.

Daniel,

By the time you read this, Mother will have remarried.

She asked me not to tell you until you had been settled.

So, you see, our reputation is saved, for the most part.

Circumstances last April (do not worry, Daniel, we all believe you) propelled her decision to accept Mr. Johnson's offer.

Gossip will die when there is no true root to it.

I say "will die" because it has not happened yet.

He is a man of good standing, as you well know. His school is admired by many. You yourself have said you wouldn't be half the man you are today if you had not enjoyed his instruction...

Daniel punched his mattress. Precisely why women had no place in his bedroom. Ever. Had the situation dented his family's character sufficiently to force his mother into matrimony? He'd simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Taking communion to Effie had been an act of mercy. Her wicked mother had schemed to leave them alone in her bedroom for mere minutes before he realized she was not there. A trick to marry off her sickly daughter.

His own mother shouldn't have married the schoolmaster unless she loved him. He read on.

"I believe our mother does care for him. She now has a companion to share the rest of her life. I could not begrudge her that. I realize that much of this will be surprising. We did try to keep the worst of the gossip from your ears .

Mother convinced Mr. Trent at church to send you out. This is why you are now on an adventure in the south. As you know, Effie's family practically owns the church.

Mother and I will attend across the street with Mr. Johnson. (They actually have cushions in his pew and Henry says not near as many baptisms are performed there.)

I'm explaining, Daniel, because I want you to be wary.

We will not be around to buffer idle tongues.

Next time, defend yourself. No more weak apologies to simpering ladies.

And for my sake, do not visit marriageable girls without a proper chaperone.

It might be different if you were bald and gray.

As it is, you are much too handsome, though you do not seem to realize it.

Now, Mother will scold me awfully if she finds out I wrote to you in this manner, so promise me you will keep it under hat, a fortnight at least?"

Daniel blew air out in a long sigh and rested his head against the bedstead. Francine was wrong. His mother had not married Mr. Johnson to regain respect. Mother never played social games.

Francine had been compelled to remind him. His position did require delicacy, and he'd best remember it. Point well taken.

DEAR FRANCINE,

Our reputation, rather, my reputation doesn't need saving and mother's marriage to Mr. Johnson is a rather dramatic move on her part to cover my non-existent sin.

She has always been sensible; why must she do this?

Is mother truly married? If she is, all I can do is wish her well when she decides to inform me.

I wish you had said something before I left.

You know as well as I do that idle gossip should be left idle and never tampered with.

The fact that it played a part in my removal from my post is not news to me, I kept

silent on the subject to spare you frustration.

As it is, I assumed the chairmen immune to the biddies.

At least one was sensible enough to find me this position.

How have the biddies enacted so much power of you, too?

To write such a note? Am I to feel guilt over your predicament, if there indeed is one?

If it is a matter over presumed guilt and spoiled reputation that requires you, Mother, and our brothers to live with Mr. Johnson, then I can say with an open heart that you are in good hands.

He is not Father; no one could be. But he is a warm-hearted gentleman to the core and I shall dare to say that God will bless you for being his new family.

No worries over my manners, dear sister. Our parents taught me well and you know that I am careful. Not everyone is as desperate or dishonorable as Effie and her mother.

Do you hear from Mr. Crawley?

Your loving brother,

Daniel.

He sat back. Had he been too sharp? Sometimes one had to speak pointedly. Francine herself had urged that in her own missive. He was still slightly annoyed with her.

He held a chunk of wax over his candle and allowed it to puddle three times across

the folded letter. He blew to cool it and sealed with an old signet ring he never wore.

THE NEXT MORNING DANIEL grabbed his coat and entered the kitchen.

He'd dubbed it Kilgore's place, but he'd begun to regret the name.

The cook had claimed the wide fireplace to mend and what have you, to keep a minister's home in order.

He wouldn't mind propping his feet there now and then, especially when winter assaulted with snow and ice.

His toast lay on the table soaked with melted butter, next to a bowl of congealed oatmeal .

Mrs. Kilgore was up in an instant. "Cream, sir? Tea, sir?" Her penitent voice an acknowledgement of his reprimand.

"Both, thank you. Won't you join me, is that your husband at the door? Tell him to come in and partake. I should like to meet him.

A great bear of a man stepped in carrying a large basket. A fluff of hair added to his height. "Heard from m' wife you was in. I hope the house is well set 'nough for your likin'? I plugged them mouse holes as best as I could. Brought you kittens to choose from." His grin as wide as the river.

"Kittens?" Such a gift. Cats were as inconvenient as rats in the city. Snowballing them as a child had been his greatest pleasure until he realized he might be causing them pain. But this was not the city. This was a small farming town. Rich in land, and evidently cats as well.

Mrs. Kilgore took a white spotted one from the basket. "I wouldn't mind having two around here. For the company."

"Mr. Kilgore, you are most generous. I suppose one cat in the kitchen wouldn't hurt anything."

"You'll need a cat wherever the mouse may be, beg your pardon, sir." She sounded worried. "Don't you have mice in New York? Especially up in th' larder?"

The kitten leapt out of Mrs. Kilgore's arms to the creamer in front of Daniel. "Oh for shame, it's spoiled your milk." She scooped it up and placed it back into the basket and grabbed a dishrag. Tiny mewings increased.

Daniel cautiously lifted the lid. "Uh..." One was smaller than the others. A bit of a runt with an odd hole in its ear. Probably die soon and he wouldn't have to bother with it further. "I'll have that one."

"Naw. You don't want that one. I'm going to drown it soon as you've picked a healthy one."

"Drown it? By no means. This is the one I'll have. King David was a mere shepherd boy, you know? "

The couple looked at him blankly.

He felt a sudden pang of affection for the pitiful looking creature. He plucked it from the basket and instinctively let it curl against his chest. "You never know about those runts, she may be the best mouser this parsonage has ever seen." Daniel lifted the toast to his mouth and took a bite.

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The sky blossomed a forget-me-not blue and Daniel sighed. The fine day had made the walk here pure pleasure, but the visit wasn't going as he'd hoped.

Mr. Stanton drew from his pipe, not seeming to notice the momentary lapse in conversation, which had been animated for several minutes.

It seemed Mr. Stanton had issues with the previous minister and made an extensive list to ensure such irritations never happened again.

The paper crinkled in his front coat pocket, a wad of discontent.

Daniel smiled despite the man's authoritative stance. He could certainly handle the simple subject of flowers in the sanctuary. "Drooping flowers certainly don't lift a body's spirit. But surely flowers aren't my duty to provide?"

Mr. Stanton nodded. "Jeffery Barton might loan you one of his slaves for cleaning, but with harvest coming," he shrugged, "Job's up to you."

Mrs. Stanton nodded her agreement while two of their daughters sat as straight as New York statues. Why couldn't one of these females help? Surely, they'd know more about flower arranging. Good grief. The silliness of some people.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Stanton." He'd do his best to pass the task to someone better suited, that's for sure. And as quickly as possible.

A slave appeared with a silver tray of lemonade in crystal glasses.

He'd better keep his abolitionist beliefs in his back pocket if he was going to thrive.

But still, slavery rankled him. And he'd caused enough stir in his early career for a long, clean record to matter.

One day, he wanted to go home to New York again, work for a larger congregation. Do some real good.

He sipped his lemonade in an acceptable quiet. He would not query the young ladies—they seemed far from interested by his visit. But one was missing—the blind one so many in town had been eager to gossip about. “Do you not have three daughters, ma’am?”

Mrs. Stanton pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eye. “Clara. Perhaps you have heard about her accident?”

“I have, ma’am. A fall from a horse?”

She dabbed the other eye and returned the handkerchief to her sleeve.

Had there been tears? Quite theatrical. Perhaps it was the unseen ones she'd tried to blot away.

“Is she indisposed to lemonade on a fine day?” Anything to meet the famous wild woman punished by blindness. Rumors, they tainted at will. He'd see her vindicated.

“I'm afraid, Mr. Merrick, that she suffers with melancholy. See, she sits alone beyond the tree.”

“Ah.” Daniel looked where she pointed. Clara slowly swayed on a wide swing, he couldn't make out her features, but a great length of comely maple-colored hair had

come undone and swept the ground. She didn't seem to care.

Mr. Stanton slapped his knees and spoke through his pipe. "Lord willing, she'll quickly regain her sight soon enough and wed soon after. But I won't allow my women to ever climb on the back of a horse again, as long as I breathe."

Daniel's eyes lingered on Clara, "A loss of freedom on their part."

Mr. Stanton guffawed as though he told a joke. "They don't feel it one bit. Not with my fat purse emptying faster than rain falls, isn't that right my daughters? "

Alice grinned. "It's only because of the ball, Father."

Mrs. Stanton's smile grew as well. "It's one of the most important days of the year, with Belle's coming out."

Daniel blinked at the thought. A debutante's entrance into society was the family's way of helping her make the most fortuitous match—for both families.

Frills and glamorous balls aside, did these young women really enjoy being the means of financial gain?

A most important day of the year, indeed. Sold to the highest bidder.

Mr. Stanton stood, so did Daniel. "I'll show you the stables, see if that thoroughbred won't suit you." He led the way. "Let's leave the ladies to their never-ending talk of silks and lace."

Daniel bowed to the ladies. "I am in desperate need of a horse."

Mrs. Stanton nodded. "You've come to the right place, Reverend."

A childhood dream was about to come true. A man needed a horse, not a cat. His pace quickened as they reached a row of stables that put to shame the homely cabin he'd visited yesterday.

He glanced back to Clara. The haze of autumn's final light framed her in its glow. The sun had set its sight on her and only her. Did she know that God saw her? That He cared?

An hour later, Daniel bounced down the road on a borrowed saddle and a suspicious horse. Not the sleek racing Thoroughbred Mr. Stanton had showed off. But an older Morgan who tossed its head from side to side as if displeased with its new owner.

"We'll become good friends, you and I. Not to worry." More to convince himself than the horse.

She turned a circle and he pulled the reigns.

Too tight, the horse reared. He tried to hang on but slid to his backside, plop in the middle of the dusty road.

A dirty plume grew as he scrambled to snatch the bridle.

The horse tossed her neck from him. His backside ached and his frustration grew. He needed riding lessons .

The horse stamped her feet. "All right, Miss, I have dominion over you and you'd better get used to it. He slapped dust away and grabbed at the reigns once more, but faltered. "I suppose I can walk by your side. Just this once."

The road loomed, long and empty. Two more miles with this bossy beast by his side. He couldn't help but think of Clara Stanton after his minor fall. How would he deal

with such a strange tragedy? The threat of living in darkness pulled at his soul. “Poor thing. Dear God, I can’t fathom it.”

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Clara stood in the hall, resting her hand on the chair railing—a welcome guide to the library. Little could she do, but hide from pity.

Warm breath shot into her ear, she jumped. “Christian be down in your daddy’s study,” Lewis whispered.

“He’s here?” Her heart pulsed hard against her chest. Why hadn’t someone warned her?

“Yes, Miss Clara.”

“Take me down, please. Take me to him.” How she wanted to hear his voice again.

“Now I tell you ‘cause I figured you wanted to know. Your Pa tells me not to bother them.”

“Am I presentable?” Though pointless, she considered finding a mirror.

“You always like a fresh-cut flower.”

“I’ll make sure you aren’t to blame. You can tell Father I heard Christian’s voice.” Why hadn’t he called her sooner? “Take me. Now please.”

He led her down the broad stair, stepping softly on the carpet. Too slow. They turned a long corner down a hall then stopped. Lewis placed her hand on the door knob and backed away and left her alone. Voices bit back and forth. Father was angry. She covered her mouth with a hand and waited.

“I won’t marry her. ”

What? No. He didn’t say it... Clara grip tightened around her middle.

“You signed an agreement. I can sue you.”

Silence. This couldn’t be happening.

“Give it more time. Wait another week before making this decision. One more week. See what the doctor says.”

The door gave way before her, a brush of wind stroked her face. “Clara. What are you doing here? Get back to your room.”

“Christian?” She waited for him to take her in his arms.

“What are you talking about? He isn’t here.”

How dare he try to trick her! “Yes, he is. I heard him.”

“Clara.” Christian’s voice opened her heart.

“Where have you been? Why have you not come to see me?” She needed answers. She needed him. She reached out for his hand.

“Clara, I beg you. Release me from our engagement.” His voice quaked as if afraid of her. Why? Why did he fear her? It made no sense.

She moved forward, searching with her hands. Christian’s long fingers found hers, finally, finally. He dropped them and she reached for him again. She met empty air. He’d stepped back.

“Why?” She lifted the ring from beneath her shawl. “You promised you love me.”

“Sometimes, love—listen, this hasn’t been easy for me either.” He sounded angry.

“To think that my horse caused your accident. I haven’t been able to forgive myself.”

“I forgive you.” She could do nothing else.

“No. You shouldn’t.”

She reached for his jacket, laid her hands on his chest. He stepped back again, as though her touch was poisonous. Something fell from her father’s desk .

She dropped her hands, uncertain. “Don’t you love me?” Her words sounded like a weak child’s. Had she been nothing but a business deal? Surely not. Father caught her elbow and drew her close.

“Not enough.” Christian mumbled.

Not enough... the words stabbed like a dagger. “Then...I release you.” Her voice quivered. She focused on breathing. No. He would surely come to his senses after seeing her again. Hearing of her willingness to forgive. If only she could...

“You don’t have to do that, Clara.” Her father huffed. “Look here, what are you doing to her. Do you realize the setback you are causing my poor child?”

“I will not discomfort you any further.”

What? Was it really over? His voice, she’d dreamt of it since her accident. Longed for it. Needed it to quiet the endless assault of fear. Did he not know what he meant to her?

Christian left the room. His riding boots clipped down the hall. A door slammed.

She broke from her father's embrace and ran after him.

She might be foolish, who cared? He wasn't gone forever.

Couldn't be. She smacked her hip on the cloak table in the foyer ignoring the pain as she shot through the door, sightless hands sweeping the space before her.

He'd be at the stables, of course. Mother never allowed hitching at the front.

She ran roughly in the right direction. Her father's voice boomed after her.

"Christian!" Emotion squeezed her effort. She ran into soft flesh and hard leather, her lip stung, a warm drip slid down her chin. Pain and blood.

"Good night, Clara! What are you doing?" Christian leapt from his horse and stood at her side, pressing a handkerchief into her hand .

She shoved him away. "You said you'd do anything for me. Anything. I said the same thing. What if I had married you and this happened? Would you have ceased to care?"

Silence.

"Don't stand there. Talk to me!" If only she could see his face.

"It's over." He impatiently sighed. "You have released me, Clara, and I need to go."

"What if you were blinded? I would not toss you aside. Never would consider it. Have you never truly loved me?" Not exactly how she planned to reverse her fortune.

“No, Clara. I never loved you. I’m sorry.”

She jerked the ring from its chain and threw it to the dust. “I don’t love you either.” If she could have seen the thing, she would have trod hard on the bauble.

Her father took her hand and began pulling her back to the house. She shouted, “I’ll burn the letters too, unless you want fodder for a future conquest? I’ll send those post haste.”

A sob locked her throat. She tasted the salt from her own tears, or was it blood? This was the death of everything.

Her father lifted her in his arms. “I could have saved the engagement if you hadn’t interfered.”

More guilt. More shame.

His voice boomed through the foyer. “Jenny! Jenny!” He set her on a chair.

Pattering feet sped towards them. “What happened?” Lucy. Her thin arms wrapped Clara’s waist. “Oh, Clara.”

“Massah?”

“Clean her up.”

“Clara-girl, let me see.” Jenny’s calloused hands lifted her chin. “Dat man, dat man. He gonna kill this chile.”

All she could do was shake her head. Words wouldn’t come.

Lucy led her to the kitchen chair. “Your lip is bleeding. ”

A wet cloth pressed her lips, dabbed her chin. Her stomach lurched.

“NO DAUGHTER OF MINE behaves like a...like a wild, desperate animal. I don’t care who it is or what was happening. Why would he want to come back to you now? You’ve ruined everything. After a display like that, I shouldn’t wonder if he ignored our acquaintance forever.”

Mother’s words. She reeled at their cruelty.

Lucy spoke in her quiet voice. “Why should it matter if you continued his acquaintance? It’s altogether hopeless. There would always be a strain between us.”

At least Lucy spoke cold sense. Clara’s stomach remained sour. The spring water her mother insisted she take did little to make it secure. She pushed her body farther into her bed. She draped an arm over her eyes to cork the tears. Her face was raw and her lip stung and throbbed.

“Take another glass.” A trickle filled the glass. “Marie, be sure that she does.”

The clink of glass on glass, then glass to lip. Clara reached for the stem.

“You’ve spilled,” Marie said.

“I don’t care.”

“Marie is not a slave, Clara. Speak with a trifle more respect.” Mother patted her hand.

Sickening, childish pity. Clara bit her lip. A broken heart isn’t a child’s scrape.

“I’ll take care of her, Mother. It’s Marie’s afternoon off.” Lucy drew a chair by her side .

“Very well. Don’t let her leave this room. I’ll have what little ice we have remaining sent up.” Mother and Marie left, but the truth was Mother had left a long time ago. When the accident happened.

But Lucy stayed. Perhaps she cared after all? Lucy stroked Clara’s head. “Try to sleep, will you? I won’t make you drink anymore of this. Here, I’ll read to you. Shakespeare always quiets the mind.”

“Thank you...” Clara’s head pounded. She felt for the ring, a habit of the many recent dark days she’d endured. Now forever gone.

“I KNOW—SHE CAN JOIN the Shaker community. They’ll take anyone.” Alice murmured from her bed in the room. They thought she was asleep. She had woken minutes ago when they’d noisily changed for bed.

Water splashed at the washstand. The swish of hairbrushes stroked for several minutes.

“That’s not very funny, Alice.”

“It’s brilliant. She’ll never marry like that, they don’t allow it anyway. They’d find some job for her to do, plus they’ll give her room and board until she dies. That way she won’t always be tripping around here when this place is mine.

“You don’t inherit, she does,” Lucy whispered. “Well, her husband will.”

“I don’t see it working out that way. And if she’s here, she’ll hold us back. Don’t you see? Men don’t want to marry a woman with a spinster tag-along.”

“I think we have time before we need to be concerned about that. She’s only nineteen. I pray she regains her sight, as should you.”

“Well of course I do, I’m not a complete heathen.”

“Are you sure you’re going with the jasper green for the ball?” Lucy, so apt at changing topics.

“Quite sure. ”

“When you’re ready to surrender, let me know.” Lucy laughed.

“I look better in jasper than you do. Stick with the topaz. It suits your pale complexion.”

Clara’s still position grew rock hard. She needed to roll over, but didn’t want them to find out she’d heard everything. Perhaps it would do Alice good to be found out. Not that it would shame her. Alice lived only for Alice.

Her arm was numb, and still, they rambled on about clothing and patterns. What time was it? Were the lamps turned down? Fury filled her. She would show them that blindness had nothing to do with her beauty.

In the morning, she would beg to be fitted. Spend every last dime she’d saved on a gown the Queen of England would envy. Attracting a husband would not be as difficult as Alice said.

“Turn out the light, Lucy. I’m tired.”

“I’ve one more chapter.”

“Go to the library if you must stay up.”

“I’d rather not.” I’m comfortable right here.

Clara didn’t move until she heard the oil lamp’s quiet click and Lucy’s even breathing. She rolled over and rubbed her numb arm. Royal blue suited her best. Of course, she’d wear the sapphires from her grandmother, her throat and arms bare...

Irresistible.

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Any hope of discussing satin and lace with Mother melted away at breakfast. Yesterday's action was today's consequence, and perhaps tomorrow's too.

The declaration was made that she should be taken to church for her childish behaviors could only be eradicated by a long, strong sermon.

Alice had thought this exceptionally humorous.

Last night's dream of unequalled beauty seemed childish now. She'd still try, but her mother's sharp tongue, though despised, shared sense.

Perhaps the fall had ruined her looks. Yesterday's run-in with Christian's horse surely had done damage to her complexion. A shot glass of vinegar or any amount of Marie's powder puff doubtfully whitened any of it. Oh, the horror of being seen without seeing.

A few hours later, Clara found herself ushered with her family into their regular pew.

Of that she had no doubt. Heat seared her cheeks.

The entire church must be staring. Clothing rustled past and voices rose higher than a whisper.

Her first time back in the pew should have been a happy occasion but she felt as if she was on display.

Somewhere a hymnal or a bible slapped to the floor and she jumped. The next

second, a cold hand took hers from her lap and patted it. “Poor child. I’m right sorry for you.” The quaking voice could only be Mrs. Black .

Clara stiffened. “Good morning, Mrs. Black, how are you today?”

“Ach, she knows me, she knows me...” Another hand patted her cheek.

No one else approached. Pitiful murmurings from the pews behind her snaked into her ears. “She must be clumsy now... Do you think she’s pretending?” Somewhere, on the other side of her parents, Alice giggled. A whisper of Mr. Grant’s name met her ears.

Did everyone know about her broken engagement as well? She swallowed at the bitter pain that pressed against her chest. His behavior towards her had been so confusing, a dagger plunged deep into her spirit. She was broken, valueless. He didn’t want her anymore.

The gossip ceased and moved on with anticipation about the new minister, even her mother joined in. Yet she knew they silently searched her face for a glimmer, as if peeking into a room one is not supposed to enter. A sightless stare, that’s all she had to show.

Did Belle see her? She twisted a glove finger into a knot. Mother smacked her hand as she would a child’s. Good manners mocked her panic. Her insides twisted. She needed to go home. Or somewhere other than home. But where? England to see Grandmother. Yes, soon. Think on Grandmother...

Everyone silenced their chatter as a new, calming voice floated above her. “Let us pray.” She couldn’t join in but his words roared in her ears. “We cast our cares upon You, for You careth for us...”

The words were an insult. Mother was right to bring her here for punishment. She shifted in her seat to catch the warmth of the light on her face and neck that flowed through the windows and dreamt of climbing on the back of her horse again. Over hill and valley, they'd both run and never stop.

DANIEL'S COLLAR ITCHED . Shaving with a dull blade hadn't helped. He swept a slow gaze around his new congregation, taking them in singly, yet as a whole. These were His church, these were the ones he was sent to teach and love. No exceptions.

They stared back as though to read his entire history in one sitting.

Did they know how hard it was to keep a welcoming grin on his face?

An older lady in black smiled, revealing bright, even teeth.

And there was Susanna-who'd-riffled-through-his-things not wearing pink.

No, he wouldn't search her face. If he found a smirk there on this first morning, how would he get through the sermon?

He found the center post, slathered in white paint. The perfect point of focus. The organist pumped and began a hymn, the countdown began. Too late to run for a fistful of Mrs. Ramshaw's mint. His pulse began to rise and flood his veins, and with a pounding heart, he preached his first sermon.

Some forty minutes later, he took a long fresh breath of air.

Indeed, they seemed to truly hang on to his every word.

Thank you, Lord. He sat in a chair on the platform and waited out the organist's final song.

He glanced around the room. The Stanton girl everyone pitied—that must be her.

My, but didn't her eyes look weary? And not at all pleased to be here. Perhaps she still suffered.

Looked like she had a run in with something—even so, she was rather becoming, but not at all like Miss Gray. Bosh, quit the daydreaming, Fisher-of-men...

The final note played and he stood for the benediction.

Moments later, his position at the door was so crowded that he couldn't move.

His vestments grew heavy around his neck.

Enthusiastic and blunt members had already diagrammed the sermon into sections of importance, doctrine, and whatnot and told him so.

One man promised detailed notes to be delivered as promptly as he could make them.

Daniel humbly nodded, his only goal to get out of that stifling robe.

The Stanton family wove through the crowd to exit. No chance of meeting the blind one. She probably wanted to be left alone. How would it feel to—

“You will come to dine for luncheon?” A woman with a longish face and gray bun appeared before him. Wrinkles pulled at her lips and smiled at her eyes.

“You are too kind, Miss...?”

“Mrs. Ramshaw.”

Ah, the lady with the mint patch. “Up the hill from the parsonage, I believe?”

“If you are ready, you may escort me there.” She put out her arm to be taken before he’d offered his.

A confident woman. His last meeting with a woman of her caliber had devastated his future. A wrinkle deepened between her eyes. He’d paused too long. Not all women—thank the Lord—were like Mrs. Griscomb. “Thank you, I’d be delighted.”

So long as she didn’t have a single daughter in need of a husband. He closed the church doors and pulled her waiting hand onto his arm. His debut behind him, and a free meal before him. At least that was the hope.

THE COACH JOSTLED HOMEWARD on the long, graveled roads she’d never see again. Lewis, ever careful, avoided the muddy holes. She’d made a decision. “I never want to go to church again, Mother.” This wasn’t a matter for debate.

“Oh...you want to go to hell and live with the devil, do you?” Alice’s nasty question bit through the air.

Alice knew nothing of hell or of darkness. Church couldn’t pull her out of this pit, no. The people assembled would bury her beneath her own weight. She couldn’t bear any more .

“Hush, Alice,” Mother said. “Hold your tongue. Why, Clara, would you say such a foolish thing?”

Clara needed them to understand. “If you were in my shoes, would you understand? Would you want people constantly staring? You know I heard everything they said. My ears work fine.”

“Really, Clara, you should give people more credit. You weren’t the only subject of interest.”

“I’ve heard you too, Mother.”

Her father’s voice rumbled. “Respect your mother, Clara. Think about her feelings instead of your own for a change.”

“What? Her feelings? Has your daughter died? Has she ruined herself? Eloped? What has she to grieve? Surely, Mother was not in love with Christian, only to be rejected...” She felt a large, calloused hand slap her face, the side where bruises hadn’t already formed.

Father. How could he? A thousand needles pricked her heart and tears dropped without restraint. He’d not struck her since...

Lucy reached for her arm. “No more, Clara. Lean on me and rest until we get home.”

Must she forever live in shame? Clara gripped the edge of the seat. He’d not struck her since she’d accidentally wandered into the slave quarters. So many years ago—she but ten years old.

Moments later, Father spoke as if no great wrong had just occurred. “No flowers in the sanctuary today. Unacceptable. I’ll need to speak with Daniel.”

DANIEL FEASTED ON COLD roasted chicken and hot potatoes.

Hot potatoes, Mrs. Ramshaw had said, did their own work with no labor on her part, so she wasn’t breaking Sabbath.

Biscuits had been left warming on the stove and were none the worse for waiting, and

that apple cake: he greedily wanted twice as much as he was offered.

The fact that the entire meal was followed by hot coffee filled his being with a contentment he hadn't felt since being kicked out of New York.

Food offered such blessing...such power. ..

He crossed one leg with the other. If he enjoyed a spread like this each day, he'd be truly successful.

And possibly overweight. Never mind the martyrs of the past being burned at the stake for the sake of the Gospel.

That kind of thing wouldn't happen here.

Then again, didn't some of those early church leaders also cross their legs under tables of satisfaction only to be brought to some kind of reckoning?

He uncrossed his legs. People always had a motive.

A Queen Esther move with a non-debatable truth.

The way to a man's heart through food, and all that.

He'd better get going before the request came.

"Mrs. Ramshaw, I thank you. The fare was most refreshing."

"I confess I've an ulterior motive for inviting you." She winked.

The last biscuit he ate dropped in his stomach like a rock. Of course, she had a

motive. He tossed his napkin on the table and waited. Another opportunity to practice patience.

She cleared her throat and looked him in the eye. “I find it my duty to inform you about certain...past incidents.”

He’d have not part in gossip. “Are you certain these incidents must be shared?” The remnants of the feast on the table no longer seemed so heavenly.

She held her knobby hands up in defense and a heaven-forbid-him-think-it glance. “I do not intend to gossip, mind you.”

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Certainly not. Never. “Of course not, but one must be careful...” Admonishing his flock could be difficult at times. Especially those well above his age.

She leaned towards him and poked one of those knobby fingers into his abandoned napkin. “Young man, you may be a preacher, but I’ve been around the world a time or two more than you have.”

Humor lurked in her eyes. What was she about? “Tell me if you must. ”

“I must. Being your first Sunday and all, you are feeling rather accepted. The honeymoon so to speak. Things may get harder down the road.” She paused. Being a minister had always been hard. “A group of us are abolitionists. And a majority are not. I need to know which foot you dig with.”

The old Irish term was not lost on him, only this was no Protestant, Catholic debate. What to do about this one so soon in the game? The southern church had already decided. “Will you not tell me which group you follow first?”

“A man like yourself, preaching with such conviction as he showed in the pulpit today would hardly be afraid to come out and say anything that needs saying.”

“Came across a bit strong, did I?”

“It’s good for them.” She gave him another pointed look and recited words he knew by heart, and had once argued passionately.

“Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of

human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary action. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion. Be gentle toward all men, and see that you invariably do with everyone as you would he should do unto you.” She smiled. “Your John Wesley said that.”

He tented his fingers on the table. “I do not hold to slavery, but know this, I’m not about to start a war in this town over the issue.”

“War...” She looked at her empty plate. “Perhaps it will come to that.”

Daniel panicked. To wear one’s politics on one’s sleeve could mean the loss of his job.

He’d already crossed the chasm that breached the church to stay in ministry.

“Please keep this to yourself. I need time to get to know the people.” The southern Methodists had chosen sides.

This didn’t mean that the congregants followed suit.

Thus his reasoning for accepting the job so far from home.

She dipped her head. “As you wish. ”

He was curious, though. “Do you belong to a very zealous group?”

“Five women and two gentlemen. We have our ploys.” Her eyes sparkled with far too much story behind them for safety. The law might not spare even an old woman from punishment.

“Mrs. Ramshaw, I pray you do not put yourself in danger?”

She gave a low nod, her cap lace dragged the table. “We are very careful.”

“You spoke of incidents, I believe.”

“Most members of our church own other human beings.”

“Yes. I am aware.”

“Four of our members own at least twenty or more. Two of them appear to be fair masters, as fair as one can be in such sordid circumstances. The other two, I’ll not give you the names yet, ought to be tarred and feathered.”

Her eyes pierced his as if challenging his senses. Obviously, he was not properly shocked.

Her voice took a bitter turn. “I once nursed one of their women back to life. She was so abused she could no longer hold her bowels. Gave her to me as a gift! Stupid man. I took her gladly and gave her freedom before she died.”

“I tried to be a mother to her, but it wasn’t me she wanted.

Her own mother would not be released to come to her daughter’s side even for those last hours.

The beast refused my request. The woman had been necessary at a garden party.

” Bitterness and sorrow laced her words.

Tears gathered about the corners of her eyes. This woman confounded him.

“I’m sorry.” Life carried much ugliness.

“Yes. But to tell you the truth, I’m tired of being sorry.”

Daniel sipped his steaming coffee, the paltry action failed to ward off the imagery and pain. “This man—has anyone confronted him about his ways? ”

“A few. They were not of enough social importance to tip the scales though. Evil is evil, Rev. Merrick. If you are to be the keeper of this flock, you need to know in what manner the evil exists.”

He shifted in his chair. “I wish it were more clear-cut.”

“It is clear cut, indeed, how is it not?” Her words, sharp and true, sliced through his non-committal defense.

He held up both hands like a scale. “God’s law versus American law, both are taken as infallible and interchangeable among its people.”

“If only they were one and the same, I suppose it would be Heaven,” she smiled.

“Yes, quite.”

“I will not ask you who these cruel people are. Perhaps soon, I might. But for now, let me pray on it.”

“Only pray about it if you are going to do it properly, sir,” she said.

This woman surely was made from pepper and spice. “What do you mean by properly?”

“Pray with the expectation of getting exactly what you’ve asked.”

Mrs. Ramshaw's words wheedled into his mind.

Ate at him all afternoon. His duty was to teach God's word, preach, and prepare the dying for Heaven.

Not to take a slave master in hand or enter into politics of any kind.

Being a one-man show at this church, there simply would not be time.

God would be a proper judge. Yes, the matter was God's work and His alone.

He propped his cold feet by the dying kitchen fire and ate a chunk of toasted bread. He rocked slowly and gazed at live, orange-red flickering coals. He missed the noise of his busy brothers, his humming mother. Even Francine, though she'd managed to annoy him greatly .

When all was settled with his mother's marriage to Mr. Johnson, he'd invite them for a visit. Perhaps at Christmastime. By then, every frustration would be swept under the rug. He hoped.

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Clara spent her afternoon on the swing and let the late October sun warm her body. The sunlight pushed and prodded at her darkness, nudged at it until completely covering her. And then the warmth was gone. Grief scrambled to regain ground where peace had been but moments before.

One of the slave children came. “Want me to push you, miss?”

“No. But thank you.”

“Did you see that? I made a face.”

“Did you? What is your name?”

“Oscar.”

“Oscar, I’d like to be alone.”

He didn’t answer. The sneak. Was he crouching by the tree trunk? The thought unsettled her.

“Oscar?”

“I thought you was blind!” He sounded shocked.

“If you don’t leave me be, I’ll have Jenny come after you with a pear tree switch.”

“Yessum.”

Feet pattered away. “Wait! Come back.” Feet pattered back.

“Yes, Miz Clara?”

“Are Mother and Father about?”

“No—they went inside.”

“Take me to the stables. Now, Oscar.”

Silence met her ears .

“Oscar, take me to the stable.” She reached out for him. A moment later, his small hand slipped into hers and pulled her off the swing.”

“You wanna see your horse? You can’t. Ain’t here no more. Your father done rid of her.”

“What?” He wouldn’t have done that without telling her.

“She be done for, Miss. I ain’t allowed to help you to the stable. Massah’s orders.”

No. He wouldn’t do this. “Leave me be, then.”

She grasped for the swing ropes and lowered herself once again. Leaned her head against the rough fibers. Gone? Esther too? And Christian. Though faithless of character, yet she still longed for him. Hated herself for it.

Hope rose a little. Tomorrow Father would take her to the Louisville eye specialist. More than her sight may be repaired at that appointment.

Someone jarred the swing ropes still. “Miss Clara, yo mother wants to see you in the parlor.” Lewis took her hand.

Clara wrapped her arms tightly about her middle. The little warmth from the sun had abandoned her. The air now tight and frigid.

She entered the parlor to find further irritation. Mother’s voice lit a fuse. “It’s not that we don’t think you’d enjoy it, but we are afraid you won’t properly heal if you travel.”

Confusion abounded. “Am I not to go to the specialist after all?”

“What your mother is trying to say it that you won’t be going with us to London for the season.” Always blunt, Father never tip-toed.

Clara groped the air for them. Either of them. She grasped at nothingness. They hadn’t reached out for her. “London is just the thing I need! I’m desperate to get away from here. The sea air heals everybody.” How she needed the distraction of this journey .

Father measured his words. “Not this time. Your sisters are of age, or nearly. We need to make good connections.” More brutal truth.

So that was it. She’d be in the way. Needed to be hidden. “When are you leaving?”

“After the McPherson ball.”

“That’s only a few weeks away.”

Alice seemed annoyed. “You knew when we were going. We planned it last summer.”

“You did?”

Alice sighed. “Dear Lord, she’s lost her memory as well.”

Mother’s voice grew closer. “Don’t swear Alice. Yes, Clara, we did plan it.”

A shawl was draped about her shoulders by unseen hands. But no comforting embrace followed. “I haven’t lost my intelligence, I just don’t remember.” A lot had happened.

“We always go after hunting season is over. But don’t bother your brain about it, my dear.

Do your duty.” She jolted as her father lifted her by the hands out of her chair and guided her from the room into the large hall.

She must be careful how she spoke, the memory of his slap fresh.

“You and I are off to Louisville tomorrow. Get rest, it will be a full day. We’ll have to stay there over-night, Marie will have your bag ready and will accompany us. ”

“May we go shopping?” Her mouth formed a smile she didn’t feel.

He laughed. “Is that my girl returning to her former self? Of course. Anything you like.” He patted her arm and walked back into the parlor where the others continued to scheme.

He left her there, alone. Silent. She reached out for the chair railing and found a column. Her stomach squeezed and her head pounded. Tornadic thoughts swirled .

Little by little, her formerly happy existence was being denied her. Stripped away. As

if life itself wished to spit her out like the lukewarm water that new preacher spoke of.

Everything rested on her doctor's appointment. And if that failed, then the McPherson ball mattered a great deal. Christian would be there. Watching her. She'd win him back with her beauty and wit. "He won't be able to help himself," she murmured.

She stood a little taller as she climbed the stairway, as though a crown rested on her head. But such garlands slip lopsided when the head bows in humility. No London Season? She'd tried not to let that hurt. Perhaps she'd be better off under a headstone.

CLARA HAD NO TIME TO rest. Once they'd stepped foot off the train in Louisville, her father hired one cab to take Marie to the hotel—that was a relief, and another to take them directly to the doctor.

Thank goodness Marie took care that each hair was in place and her complexion well powdered before debarking. Really, what else was she good for? She was certain that Marie hated her.

The only good thing about her family leaving for London was that they would take Marie with them. Mother wouldn't miss her eldest daughter but she could not bide without her servant. Could Clara bide without London? She stifled the jealousy.

A throat cleared to a tenor voice. "Doctor Rosenthal is ready for you. Come this way."

Without warning her father pulled her along. She tripped on her own feet as the pair abruptly turned another direction.

"She may sit here."

A kind voice came from her left. “Good afternoon, I hope your travel was uneventful? ”

Clara turned her head where she thought Dr. Rosenthal stood. Drat, what did he look like? His voice seemed young. “Yes. Thankfully the train wasn’t too crowded.”

“So, tell me about the accident.”

Clara began, but her father immediately interrupted and gave a version she had never heard before. In truth, she didn’t remember much. Just Christian’s horse, hers going too fast. Colliding. Apparently no details were required from her, the victim.

“How many months has she been blind?”

“Going on three.”

Had it been that long? Clara shivered. “Three months...”

“I see.”

Clara’s chin jerked. “Of course you do. Will I?”

“That is up to Providence. Let us reason with Him, shall we? Can you see shadows at all?”

She shook her head.

“Head aches?”

“At first.”

“You say she was in bed for a month?”

“A fever took hold. Doctor Brown let some blood. Weakened her, I think.”

Clara did not remember that, but rather a haze of events. Slaves coming in and out. Darkness. Screaming...were they her screams or another's?

A soft hand took firm hold of her chin. The doctor had minty breath. He moved her face slightly to one side, and back again, an unfamiliar inspection by this stranger. Only Christian had taken her face in his hands like this. She remembered how tender he was.

Her father spoke. “What is that? I fancy I've never seen one.”

“An ophthalmoscope. Let's me see deep into her eyes.”

Father laughed. “If only you could read a woman's mind with it, we men might get somewhere. ”

“Father!” Clara wondered what the tool looked like. How far could he see? Would it hurt? Father should not jest. She'd tried to show them her mind the other day and received the back of Father's hand for her honesty.

“There's definite optic nerve damage, I can tell that from your description alone. The fever must have been a coincidence. Swelling... No blood circulation. I'm afraid now it's been too long.”

“Too long for what?” Clara's voice cracked.

“If your eyes were going to heal, that process should have already started.”

“No...hope?” Her voice wavered. No. Please God, no. Tears swelled.

“I wouldn’t say that. Your vision may come back—but only if God wills it.”

“Father?”

“I’m sorry, dear.”

“But we’ve been here no longer than ten minutes. Surely there’s some sort of surgery? Medicine?”

“Not for this, not yet.”

“You’re an eye doctor, for heaven’s sake. Fix this. I beg you.” Clara pleaded for a sliver of sunshine.

“Excuse my daughter, she hasn’t been herself.”

“I understand. I think I’d be angry too, if it happened to me.”

Clara bit the inside of her cheeks until she tasted blood.

“Is there any tonic that might soothe her nerves?”

“Take your pick from the apothecary. Be sure she doesn’t take it more than three days a week.”

“YOU CAN FEEL HOW SOFT it is, no?” A woman with a voice as rich as chocolate pressed the cloth into her hands .

Clara stroked the silk, feeling its quality, tangible richness in juxtaposition to the

doctor's devastating news.

"Is it very fine silk? You are certain the color is my best?" Grief welled up her throat and choked her words.

Focus on the fabric ... Clara held it close to her skin, imagining.

A threadbare hope, but a hope nonetheless.

Blindness could be bearable if she were at least seen, loved.

"You shall be ravishing, I promise."

"I want the artistry to be in the cut of the dress. No lace, but as many fine tucks as possible. My father will pay you double if this is done and delivered to my door in two weeks."

"I shall work in all haste."

The bolt was pulled from her roaming hands. "See that you do." She reached for the modiste. "I want suitors without looking like some dance hall girl. You understand."

"A woman of your beauty should have no trouble." She laughed.

"Thank you. Please, will you guide me to my father? He stands outside the door." Her father had said she could buy anything she wanted. By golly, she would.

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The lady draped an arm lightly about her shoulder and led the way. The door jingled behind them and her father instantly tucked her hand into his arm and led them from the comfort of the quiet shop. “I have a surprise for you,” he touched her nose, “it happens to only be across the street.”

“I do love ice cream.” She must tip-toe. Swallow her pain and reveal her Stanton superiority. He’d yet be proud of her.

“It isn’t ice cream, at least, not yet. I’m going to buy you something that will make life easier. Come along.”

She had no choice but to step quickly. They walked across the street and up onto a sidewalk. Her father pulled open the door and a wave of tobacco engulfed her.

“We are at a tobacconist? Am I to start smoking, Father?” What a wanton lass she’d be if that were the case.

Though a few of the older poor women about town had the habit—short corn cob pipes protruding from toothless mouths.

Wrinkles creased in the direction of the draw.

.. Such a tragic, comical picture she’d make.

“Indeed no. I’ve brought you to the finest cane shop in town. It’s where your grandfather’s came from. Remember it?”

She did. Long, dark and topped with a silver snake. It had frightened her. “I don’t really want a cane.” Would Father listen this time?

“Yes, you do. Help you get about the house and estate without knocking into everything.”

The clerk interrupted. “How may I be of service to you, sir?”

“My daughter needs a cane. I’ll have none but the finest. We’d like roses on the silver work.”

Another choice made for her. “Indeed,” Clara said, “Be sure it has thorns.”

DANIEL’S MONDAY WAS as empty as his biscuit jar, naught but a few crumbs remained. He shook them into his palm and tossed them in his mouth. Better than nothing.

He supposed he ought to work on a sermon, but he already had a pile prepared from his time in New York. Sufficiently fresh for this group. Having just completed introduction visits, he was not anxious to do it again.

This quiet farm town had too little to occupy him. Yet. “You know what they say about idle hands,” he said to himself.

Snatching a pair of fire-dried socks he pulled them on. Utterly lazy. He could practice riding that horse he spent so much money on. He’d go bouncing down the road while the town laughed him out of the pulpit.

Gracious. It was a plight to always be watched.

If he was going to make a fool of himself, he supposed it would do his pride some

good.

He'd bob about on the back of that horse, fall off, but for a good purpose.

This horse would carry him where God needed him, and that was nothing to be embarrassed about.

He buttoned his vest and checked the length of his whiskers. After all, he'd only look the fool to a certain degree. A handsome fool was better than a shabby one.

A knock sounded down the hall. He ran and skidded in sock feet to the door and flung it open. A chunk of hair dropped into his eyes and he swiped it away.

"Miss Gray?" His practiced preacher-manners fell away in an instant.

"Mother sends an apple pie. I hope you like apple?"

He certainly liked that smile. "Uh, yes. I think I do...I..." He'd never kept his own house, rarely answered his own door.

His mother would show any guest to the study and inform him.

If a woman showed up for counsel, she stood protectively nearby.

Should he invite her in? No, that couldn't be right.

Hardly proper to invite a single woman into a single man's home.

Wasn't done, and wasn't safe for either reputation. He'd rather not have to relocate.

"You think? You've never had apple pie?" She stood, waiting while he waived with

that stiff grin on his lips.

Her cheeks grew rosy, a question grew in her eyes.

“I adore apple pie, thank you.”

She handed him the basket. “Well as long as you’re sure.”

“Thank you. I’m sure I’ll devour it directly.”

“An entire pie at once?” She chuckled.

“A piece, I mean. An entire piece.” He laughed. Blast, he could be so awkward. How was he able to stand in church and speak with enough confidence for an army but run into one rather striking woman and...

“Mother wants to know if you have any mending?”

“I don’t want you to spend your free time mending my clothes. I’m sure Mrs. Kilgore will oblige.”

“I shan’t mend, only my mother. I confess I hate mending.” She shrugged her pink-clad shoulders, her smile full of humor.

“I haven’t a thing. Thank her for me, please.”

She nodded and turned back onto the side walk. He watched her only for a second. In New York, one could stare without speculation. But here—watchful eyes made for ready gossip.

He was irritated with her, not attracted. Certainly not.

He shut the door and lifted the cloth away. Sweet Heavenly Father, thank You for this pie. He trotted back to the kitchen and snatched a fork. Honestly, what he'd meant to say was that the entire pie would be eaten one piece at a time.

THE HOTEL ROOM WAS too cold and Marie's muffled snore kept her awake. She rubbed her feet against a blanket. Marie said her medicine would be in a tiny tumbler within reach. Ready for her. Another promise unkept. When she felt for it, she found the bottle instead.

Perhaps she should drink the whole thing and sleep for days and days, with nothing to bother her in the darkness. The liquid sloshed. Would it kill her if she tried it? Fear seared through her consciousness.

To completely die, that was another issue. She was too young for that. She uncorked the bottle and inhaled. Lavender? She replaced the top.

The doctor had been so kind. She was supposed to go back in the morning. Dark glasses were being made for no other reason but to let others know she couldn't see. A blatant warning that she wasn't well. No more invasions of unwanted curiosity peering into her soul.

COLD WATER TRICKLED across her face. She drew a deep breath and rolled onto a wet pillow. Marie's voice spat in her ear.

"Your father is waiting for you to go to breakfast. Move quickly."

Marie's accent was most grating. Especially early in the morning.

"Tell him to go on without me." She flipped her pillow over and nestled back in.

"No."

More cold water splashed into her face. The tyrant. Clara sat up to protest, a petticoat was flung over her head and jerked down her chin.

“I shall tell Mother of your behavior towards me.” Not that Mother would object.

Marie pushed her to her feet. “Just because you have no sight doesn’t mean you get to do what you want.” A corset followed the insult. “Raise your arms.”

Clara held onto the bedstead while Marie ensured the corset would get laced within a breath of fainting. And here she thought she’d need the entire bottle of nerve relaxer...

An hour later, she sat alone in the eye doctor’s examination room. Marie waited outside, most probably by choice. Her father declared he had business to attend to and left her helpless.

Someone entered. “Good morning, Miss Stanton. I have your frames ready, would you like to try them on?”

“Dr. Rosenthal, I shan’t like them, if I may be honest.” Not that she could see how they looked on her.

Cold metal slid across her temples, a light weight rested on her nose. “There. A perfect fit and you are still as lovely as ever.”

Bold of him. But also very sweet. Her chin quivered. She mustn’t lose control.

He took her hand in his. “Life isn’t over. There are a few ways you can still see.”

“So, there is still hope?” Father needed to hear this .

“Not seeing with the eyes, but with these.” Without warning, he touched the tips of

his fingers to hers. “You can see me if you want.”

“I don’t understand.” His words were a riddle.

“Like this.” He brought the tips of her fingers to his forehead and traced them down in the barest of whispers. “Be brave. Feel the shape of my face. Use your imagination. Your true friends won’t mind.”

Her face felt hot. This was humiliating. Intrusive. True friends? “I daresay I can remember their faces.”

“Perhaps you will meet new ones. Now you know how to picture them.”

“I can’t exactly picture you.”

“Try again.”

“No thank you.”

“Then I will tell you about myself. I’m rather tall. My hair is brown. I have blue eyes. They say I have a Roman nose on a thin face.” He took her hand again pressing it against his jawline. “See?”

“Stop using that word. I can’t see .”

“Use the eyes of your heart, Miss Stanton. Whatever you think now, life isn’t over. You may find it’s only beginning.”

“It’s been the end of many things.”

“I suppose it has. Your father says you are to never ride a horse again?”

“Yes.”

“When you marry, your husband may disagree with his declaration.”

Could she ride again? The thought both thrilled and terrified her.

Abruptly, her father entered. “I’ve got it, my dear. The finest cane I ever saw. You’ll be the absolute belle of all blind women.” He pressed the stick into her hands. “Show her how to use it, Doc.”

A cane. The belle of all blind women? Must she number among them? She was a woman. Wasn’t that enough? She’d only seen a blind woman once. An old, mountain woman with dirt trapped in her wrinkles as though she never washed.

The doctor’s tender voice mixed with business.

She could tell he had a kind heart. “Keep it low to the floor. Here now, stand up, Miss Stanton.” He took her hand and raised her from the chair.

“There. Keep it sort of tilted and gently sweep the space before you. When you run into something, you’ll know to watch your step. ”

Distant laughter invaded the silence of the moment. It wasn’t fair that the rest of the world could be happy while she gasped for sight as if it were air, submerged beneath the dark, drowning surface.

“Give me your arm, Miss Stanton. I will walk you to the station with your father’s approval.” She barely heard his calm, even tone. Or her father’s parting thanks. Or felt Marie’s dutiful nudges. Or noticed the train whistle that screamed behind her as they were pulled homeward.

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S ometimes Daniel needed to kneel when he prayed. He didn't necessarily believe it had to be done at the side of his bed like his mother bade him throughout his childhood. This was different. He felt too much like the jungle sloth today and kneeling pushed him toward purposeful action.

The early excitement of moving to a new town and serving a new church had already faded some.

“Enthusiasm is a necessary ingredient, Lord. But today I want to shut my doors and windows and be an isolated bachelor. I want to eat without stopping, sleep without waking, and not have a single care in the world. Except I do admit to dreaming of Miss Gray on frequent occasion and it scares me.”

“That woman shakes me up. I didn't come here for that, though You know as well as I what a man must endure. I need a vision and a purpose beyond a woman's attraction.”

Daniel grew silent. He was not embarrassed in front of God, why should he be? God saw it all, never a place to hide from His sight.

“Give me something else to think on, will You? A pure point of focus. And if You would be so kind as to take in hand the wretched men Mrs. Ramshaw spoke of the other day without my having to get involved. That would be most appreciated as well.”

“Your will be done and Amen.”

Daniel lifted from the floor and grinned.

The next time he saw Miss Gray, he'd be fortified.

As for vision, only time would tell in what ways God would use him.

Hopefully, his hours in the pulpit would engender deeper trust in the Maker.

Trust would lead to greater relationship, maybe even a world-changing one.

His mind flicked to Mrs. Ramshaw's quest. Perhaps that same trust also led to danger. He winced at the idea.

A train chugged in the distance, whistling towards Harrodsburg and the urge to meet it swept through him. A tug like no other, one he couldn't ignore. And wouldn't. Not after a prayer like that. He put on his coat, snatched up his pocket bible and made for the train station.

If anything, the walk would do him good.

Ten minutes later a smattering of people exited the train. He looked around in case he recognized any of his new parish.

Mr. Stanton and his blind daughter stepped to the platform, followed by a grim-mouthed maid.

Clara stood behind her father, cowering, wearing dark-tinted eyewear.

Perhaps they helped her see a little? Daniel stepped forward and shook Mr. Stanton's hand.

“Good evening! Travel to Louisville, did you?” Perhaps he’d be introduced to Clara. It was the polite thing to do.

Mr. Stanton jerked a nod. “Been a long day, Reverend. Be sure there are flowers in the sanctuary come Sunday.”

That was it. He’d been dismissed with a wave and a request. Like a servant.

He watched them climb into a landau guided by one of the slaves he’d seen.

A tall, burly man, there to do his master’s bidding.

As they drove away, Clara’s face turned up to meet the little remaining sun slipping through the darkening sky. How she must crave light.

Miss Stanton—she was the reason he’d come. He knew without second thought. This is the one he must pray for without delay. A storm brewed within her. He could sense it from his pulpit last Sunday. And when she passed by him a moment ago.

He sighed and pushed the brim of his hat lower as the same stream of light penetrated his vision.

Poor child. Next time, he would finagle being introduced to her.

He’d seen her writhe in the pew, Sunday past. His words were meant to save, inspire.

How deep is her suffering that his words only chafed her wounds?

How dark is her pit? Lord, Lord, this soul!

Lord, have mercy. If she knew your love.

..Lord, guide her into love that heals her. ..

He prayed without ceasing as he walked to the post office. Two thin letters waited. One from his mother, the other, Francine. Ah. Another chapter in the life of my dear family women. What will they accuse me of now? He smiled. Francine would take his previous letter in good stride. He hoped.

He slipped his finger across the seals and read his mother's message. Home ...

So. She'd married the man. Said she loved him and that he would be a good father to the boys. Yes, no doubt about that. Francine seemed sensitive to the situation, might he pray for her?

Francine ought to know better. They needed Mr. Johnson. Their father's dwindled finances would soon fail them if she hadn't, and God forbid, they would have to find work outside the home.

Francine's letter was simple with large words written across the top.

"YOU WIN!" A very frilly apology for her former attitude, and yes, Mr. Crawley follows her to the new church.

And Mr. Crawley gives her the creeps as last Sunday he came to church with ink smeared behind his ear and one fingernail too long for her liking.

This news intimated that she allowed him to take her hand in greeting, too nice to refuse.

She shouldn't be so hard on Mr. Crawley. He was a fine journalist. His infatuation with his sister had been going on since grade school. She had vowed to never give in.

He once joked, “Marry the guy and ease his pain!”

His bathwater had been cooler than normal that night. But he hadn’t complained. He laughed aloud at the memory .

Perhaps his sister would like to come here for a while. That would liven things up a bit. Fresh new territory for husband hunting. He’d tell her so in his letter.

CLARA SAT WITH HER sisters. Steaming, spiced pork roast made her mouth water.

“The potatoes are swimming in gravy,” Lucy said.

“And shall collect about your waist if you’re not careful.” Alice sang. She needn’t worry.

Lucy tapped the table in front of her. “Your spectacles look as if they are pure gold. They are lovely, Clara. If I had to wear them, I’d want that exact pair.”

Clara pulled them off. Odd how her sisters used to always engage her in everything. Now, they acted as if she were a stranger. An unknown.

She dug into her food and receded into her own quiet.

“Clara!” Father’s voice boomed through the house. “Clara? There you are.” He pulled her away from her meal and into his study, guided her into one of his old, crackling leather chairs.

He paced the area between her and his giant desk, a swish from the right, a swish from the left.

He cleared his throat. “Your mother has been affected over this whole affair. It’s hurt her badly.

She didn’t take the news very well. Marie is with her now.

” Thick fingers tapped the desk as he paused.

“Try not to talk of your difficulties, if you will. Keep your, um, sun spectacles in your pocket. Out of sight.” He patted her shoulder as if comforting a child not allowed to keep a baby rabbit.

Clara nodded. Mother was affected? What of her own feelings?

Of a young girl suddenly struck blind. Not important, apparently.

Yes, she’d keep every fear and hurt buried and boiling within.

Hold her emotions close. She’d share nothing with her family.

Let them go their merry way to England and tea and parties without her.

Fine. Once they left, she’d do as she pleased.

Dr. Rosenthal was wrong. Marriage wouldn’t be what allowed her back on a horse. Lewis would help her, the moment they drove away.

Lucy entered. “Father, I’d like to steal my sister away for a walk.”

“Carry on, then,” He mumbled through the tip of his pipe.

Lucy quickly led her to the tobacco field near the barns, she was sure of it, and the

exertion left her breathless. A rich, sweet scent permeated the air and burned her eyes. She knew the tobacco must have been recently cut, speared, and housed for drying.

Lucy stammered and began to cry. "I'm just so sorry for you. I'm so, so sorry! I think Christian is vile for what he did to you. And Mother and Father. How can they leave you behind? I don't understand, Clara." The sobbing continued.

She cared? A sigh escaped her lips. "Don't try to."

"What can I do for you?"

Do for her? What indeed. Clara shook her head. These were issues Lucy could not fix. "Don't abandon me. I'm still the same sister." Was she? Had not her circumstances changed everything?

Lucy's arm looped again with hers. "I'll always be faithful to you, as a good sister should."

"Tell me the truth. Do I still have my looks?"

"Of course, you do."

"Please, Lucy, this is rather vain of me, but I can't help it. Please make sure that I'm always stylish."

"That I can do."

"I ordered a dress from Louisville for the ball. Christian will be there and I want to win him back." The plan glowed in her imagination.

“You think a dress will do it? ”

“It has a rather daring cut...I can hide it with a shawl until we arrive to the McPherson’s. I don’t trust Marie to help me get ready. She won’t care. She merely slings my hair into a bun.”

“I’ll do my best, Clara.” She paused. “But do you think Christian deserves another chance after abandoning you?”

“He’s just scared. I know it.” What else could it be?

TWO WEEKS LATER TO the day, Clara trembled with excitement. The gown had arrived with a mere six days to spare.

“What’s this?” Her mother snatched the large box from her.

“Father treated me to a new ball gown.”

“He did?”

“Well, doesn’t he always splurge on us, especially for the McPherson ball? Please, Mother, I want to go try it on.” Excitement built. “Come on, Lucy. Help me with it.”

Clara made her way upstairs without help, Lucy trailed behind lugging the box.

If only she could see it! Lucy helped her undress quickly. She could almost hear her smile.

“Oh, Clara. The color of this silk...I’ve never seen this shade of blue! Alice is going to be livid.” Lucy slipped pulled and tugged until the fabric hugged Clara in all the right places. In her mind’s eye she could see the sheer luxury.

“You’re beaming. I haven’t seen you beam since Christian first fell in love with you. If he refuses you again, I’ll think there’s nothing good about men.”

“Lucy?” Mother had come in. She stood silent for a moment. “Leave us.”

Lucy rustled away without a word. Clara stood, pasting on her best smile. Even her mother could not doubt her womanly capabilities .

“Sit down...please.”

“I don’t want to wrinkle this. Do you not like it?”

“You seem a grown woman.”

Barely a hint of a compliment. “That I am.”

“I shouldn’t think you’d care to go to the ball. You know you won’t be able to dance.”

“Why must you remind me of what I can no longer do?”

“Such a late night, I’m not sure that it would even be good for you to go.”

“I’m still me, Mother.” Couldn’t she see that?

“I’m going to be honest with you.” Her voice cracked.

“I can’t see how any man would want to become attached to you.

Oh, this is hard for me to say.” Her cry was muffled by a handkerchief.

“You are attractive, to be sure. Makes the whole charade all the more painful to watch. It would have been better if you had been born plain.”

“What are you saying?” What did she mean?

Mother remained silent.

Was she still in the room?

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Daniel stood stock-still behind the pulpit. Mrs. Ramshaw had done it, blast that woman. He was not ready to know the darkest sins of his congregation. He wanted to look upon them in innocent love. Admiration, even. But one stare, and a simple head turn followed by a quick nod had said it all.

Now his eyes kept roving toward the man whom she considered Hell's bait.

The organist punctuated the moment with a rather loud muddled run, sending chills up his spine. That man? Him? Not likely. Perhaps he'd read Mrs. Ramshaw wrong. Mr. Hamilton had been one of the kindest people he'd met thus far.

He apparently donated funds for the church upkeep, funds to keep him in decent cloth, and further funds to whitewash his picket fence. Seemed to be the gift people admired most. Granted, a slave was being offered for the chore.

His heart thumped rapidly behind his chest. His sermon had been a good one, if only he had not stumbled. And Mr. Stanton too? The father of that poor blind girl. Dear God.

Mrs. Ramshaw continued to look at him, and repeated her body language. There was no mistaking the message.

Think on good things. Things of good repute. Let Mr. Hamilton's and Mr. Stanton's inborn conscience—and God alone—judge them. There. Daniel felt better already .

Think on...He searched for his post in the center of the church. Time for the benediction. He repeated the holy words from memory, without an intentional

thought. The organist played the final hymn.

His eyes found Miss Stanton's. He could stare forever and she would never know. Her lips pursed against one another. Her head slightly bent downward. Rather pale. How would it be to have such a father as Mr. Stanton? He avoided looking in Miss Gray's direction

Quick! He must decide. If Mrs. Ramshaw offered luncheon, would he accept? The menu would certainly be a plate full of home-stirred goodness with a side of confrontation. He wasn't sure if he could stomach it this day. Perhaps he would be asked by another.

About thirty handshakes later, he reached for Miss Gray's hand before he thought. He gulped down his nerves. Lord, this should not be a problem. "Good day, Miss Gray." She gave him an amused smile and nodded her head as was proper. Then, too soon, the floating flower walked away from him.

He found his hand replaced into another. "Miss Lucy Stanton, good day to you."

"I'd like you to meet my sister...I..." Lucy had lost Clara's hand to their father's arm.

Blind Clara was being led away again before she could finish a sentence. Would he ever have a chance to do some good for her?

Lucy spoke, "Forgive me. I thought she was right beside me. Have a good day, Reverend."

For Heaven's sake, Mrs. Ramshaw was last.

"You'll come keep me company this afternoon, won't you?" She lent him a knowing smile. How much did the older woman see? How much did she miss might be the

more pertinent question.

“Ah. It will be my pleasure.” He lied. And fresh from the pulpit too .

She leaned in and spoke in low tones. “I trust you noticed my silent communication?”

He nodded. How many more of these silent communications should he expect?

“And” she wagged a finger between them. “You know what it is in regards to.”

He sighed and let her take his arm. He watched his congregation fade into the background, toward their homes.

How did he appear to them? And did they know of Mrs. Ramshaw’s political leanings? If they did, his association with her could become an issue. One that could make a poor jailbird of him. The incident in New York seemed like a child’s game compared to the complexity of what loomed before him.

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Pain shot through her foot as Clara fell over a large rectangle, knocking the breath from her lungs. She gripped the sides, scanning with her fingertips. Leather. Latches. Key hole. When had the trunks been hauled from the attic? Why so soon?

Marie pulled her up—led her to the stairway. “Stay down below or you’ll ruin my packing. I’ve precious much to do without you sitting on madam’s hatboxes or lumbering into a trunk.”

Somewhere, Alice laughed. Marie wouldn’t think to ask if she’d hurt herself.

Moving slowly lest she have another encounter, Clara limped to a stiff chair in the kitchen and rested her elbows on the table.

As a child, she’d been regularly kicked out of this busy place.

Now it was a refuge where mother rarely ventured—this place of slaves and servants.

A room of scent and spice. A haven to be inconspicuous.

Mrs. Ramshaw was taking tea with Mother in the parlor.

Poor Lucy had been roped into playing the dutiful attending daughter.

Jenny bustled about her work. “Dat rain don’t damp my spirit none. Cools me down and I gets a heap more done.”

Clara dreamed. The ball was a mere two days away. Having the dress was no

guarantee that she'd be allowed to attend. Why hadn't her father been honest when he permitted her to have the gown made? His kindness looked little different from cruelty.

She heard something wet and sloppy boiling in the cookpot.

"Have a taste of this Miss Clara." A steady blowing sound .

Then a warm spoon met her lips. Apple butter, "Nice, Jenny."

"You know your mother won't be taking any of this to England. Maybe I should give some to dat lady, Mrs. Ramshaw. She ain't left yet, so I betta hurry."

"Mrs. Ramshaw?" That lady had once told her to change her bonnet ribbons from red to blue, that red ribbons reminded her of harlots.

Shocking language from such an old lady, but no one ever explained why harlots should own the color red.

Mother had overheard and Clara had to change her ribbons that very day, never mind that it was the Sabbath.

A heavy step announced Lewis. "Miss Clara, you is needed in the parlor."

The woman wants to stare me down, good heavens.

Well. Let her get a good eyeful! Clara took Lewis's arm and let him lead her, though she knew the way well enough.

His large hand gently patted hers. Like a father might.

Ridiculous thought...but enough to make her eyes smart.

It seemed as though her parents only cared what prestige she might bring to the family—with her beauty and marriageable connections.

Was she worth nothing more? They walked in amid a flow of words.

A forceful current set to pull her under.

“As I was saying, we shan’t waste our time. I believe we must put good effort into living.” Mrs. Ramshaw’s platitude nailed the thought in place. But efforts were often thwarted.

“Clara, you remember Mrs. Ramshaw?” Mother’s voice, all-politeness.

“Blindness doesn’t make me forget people, Mother.” Clara clasped her hands together and curtsied. “How do you do, Mrs. Ramshaw?”

“Young miss,” a tea cup rattled, “we are to be housemates for a time. What do you think of that?” Her voice lilted with joy. “I assure you I don’t believe in boredom and we shall enjoy ourselves nearly every moment possible. ”

She felt breathless, confused. “What do you mean?” She reached for the back of a chair—anything to feel anchored.

“Is this true? Mother—are you certain I cannot travel with you?” If her efforts at the ball failed.

..if she failed... “There are blind women aplenty in Europe. I must go with you.” At least give me a chance. ..

“Clara.” Mother gripped her hand in a too-tight warning. “Not at all. I’m positive there are as you say, blind women aplenty across the sea. They aren’t, however, risking their lives on a ship.”

Clara found this laughable. Mother didn’t actually care about her or how her life might be lived. Mother’s only concern was for social perceptions. Ironical that she could sense this truth, without having to see it.

“Clara, this is best. Mrs. Ramshaw has graciously offered. You were originally going to Belle’s for the duration of our trip...” She let that terrible nugget of truth sink in.

Mother knew how she felt about Belle. Living there would have been torture.

Their days together at the Greenville Institute for Young Ladies had been telling to the woman she’d become.

So full of herself, so bent on turning every man’s head.

Belle’s fortune could sink in the Kentucky River, for all she cared.

“Marie is packing your trunk at this very moment and you will join Mrs. Ramshaw this very day.”

To Mrs. Ramshaw’s of the rather small house on the hill above the old quarry? Near town, but away from home... Why couldn’t the old woman reside here? Mother probably feared her nosing into some private family business.

“What a relief to have this settled. Attending the McPherson ball directly before we sail is rather dizzying.”

“Do I go to the ball, Mother?”

“Perhaps it is too risky. Going may make your condition worse.”

Another disappointment? Life couldn't get any worse. She had a bad taste in her mouth. The kind that apple butter couldn't soothe.

CLARA RALLIED AGAINST tears as they jostled along. Mrs. Ramshaw's voice turned musical, “I never knew water to hurt a soul. An October rain is refreshing and I daresay will do this dusty shawl some good and save it a washing.”

Clara disliked the sensation. How could her mother be so worried about her delicate health and in the same moment, send her off in an open rig during a storm?

If father had been home, he wouldn't have allowed it.

An open rig, for heaven's sake! Mrs. Ramshaw was a strange one.

Of course, this lady was the kind that no young person her age paid any mind to.

A widow that seemed more like a spinster.

That thought pricked as she recalled Alice's recent taunting and her mother's own words.

No man would want her. Might she end up alone as well?

The old lady's elbow nudged against hers in the close seating. The nag kicked mud upon her cloak, no doubt. Would anyone care to clean it off for her?

A chill wind drove the rain directly onto her face. At least a hot crock of Jenny's apple butter sat wedged between her feet.

Mrs. Ramshaw's chin strap slapped wet upon Clara's lips and fell away. "Your sisters will no doubt visit before they sail for England."

Was that an attempt at cheer? After all, Marie had packed her trunk, which meant that Alice likely circled her best laces and shirtwaists like a vulture on a dead animal.

Marie would do anything for Alice. Lucy would have been too reserved to rescue much.

Did Lucy pack my letters for me? If Alice reads them .

.. Clara sighed. Christian's messages to her had been sacred.

She hardly knew how to think of them now, after his reluctance to fulfill his promises.

To cherish or burn them? Time would tell.

"You'll be much easier to nurse than a baby, I daresay."

"A baby, Mrs. Ramshaw? I should think so, though I do not believe I am in need of a nurse. "

"I thought perhaps I might teach you some things."

"I have completed my studies to my father's satisfaction."

"But there are always things to learn, you know. Knitting. Do you know how to knit?"

Just then, the rig lurched forward and stopped at a steep tilt. Clara gasped as she held

to the side of the buggy.

“Well,” the old woman had not even squealed. “We’ve a broken wheel, imagine that. I suppose we shall have to get muddy. Nothing a hot bath can’t fix. You do enjoy a hot bath? I imagine the steam helps your eyes.”

“I trust there is not a ravine beneath me?” Clara quavered. The same nightmare that met her time after time. Swallowing depths, a darker darkness...

“Indeed not. Jump down and you’ll be right as rain. Or wet as rain, rather.”

Clara tentatively pressed one foot after the other down into the sinking mud as water oozed into her shoes.

“That’s it. I’ll have to send someone after the horse, poor creature.”

“I shan’t waste my time on knitting.” She spat. “Such tasks are for the underclasses and slaves to do.” Clara despised how she sounded to this woman, a poor scapegoat for her anger towards her family.

“Then what shall you, as you call it, waste your time doing?”

Rain drenched her bonnet and soaked her cloak. This deluge would be the death of them. “Am I my own master after all? If so, I should like to go home, please.” At least she already knew the layout of her house.

“Tut, tut. None of that now. You know it’s already been settled. Make the best of it.” A damp arm linked into hers and drew her down the path to town.

THE FIRE WASN’T HOT enough. Clara shook, her teeth clenched against the chilling wind. Mrs. Ramshaw seemed to think it fine to leave a door wide open?

“Pot’s a bit warm from this morning. Another boiling kettle will make for your nice bath. I daresay you can still undress yourself.”

“Not with the door still open, if you please.”

“You left the door open, my dear. I have neither maid nor slave, you must learn to care for yourself in the small ways as well as the other.”

The other? “Might I have some privacy?”

“I was raised up with four sisters and three brothers. And I’ve nursed a good many people in ill times. A body’s a body when it comes to a need.”

“I wish to be alone.” She was not going to disrobe in front of Mrs. Ramshaw.

Horrors. What would mother say if she could see her now?

A march through freezing rain and mud and a rudimentary tub in the kitchen, no less.

At home she had her bath in the privacy of her room, behind a curtained partition.

A male voice sounded from the front of the house. “Halooo! Mrs. Ramshaw? Are you home?”

“One moment!” Mrs. Ramshaw took Clara’s hand and placed it on the edge of the tub. “Keep it there for a moment.”

Water poured, steaming fresh on Clara’s hand.

“Get in when you are ready. There is a table to your right with a cup of tea on it. Another table to your left holds a cake of soap and a Turkish towel. I’m warming a

spare nightgown by the fire.”

Mrs. Ramshaw’s steps moved from the room, a door closed behind her.

A cool breeze blew against Clara’s wet dress.

The door remained open. If she moved her hand and stepped in its direction, would she knock into the hot stove?

Bump the tea table? Didn’t the old fool understand what it was to be blind ?

She moved slowly, wishing she hadn’t left her cane by the door. She held her hands out and felt the heat from the stove. Before she knew it, the backdoor breeze had led her to the right place. She shut the door quietly and felt for the lock. There was none.

Disrobing proved to be a frustration. Marie had knotted her corset.

Her bath water was growing cool. Indeed, if she had a pair of shears, she’d cut the cursed thing off and toss it to the fire.

By some miracle, her nails eased the strings from each other and she slipped into the tub only a moment before Mrs. Ramshaw reentered.

“You must send for one of our slaves to assist me, Mrs. Ramshaw. With the family leaving for England, I do not think they need so many about the place.”

“No, that’s out of the question. If you need anything, Clara, only ask. I am able and willing to serve you.”

Clara’s face burned. That bossy woman tamped down every request as if she were a child.

“Good news from the minister. Mr. Kilgore, his cook’s husband, has gone for the rig. We shall be independent women, you and I. Free to go and come as we please. And best news yet, the crock of apple butter will be saved.”

Mrs. Ramshaw was free to go as she pleased. Not Clara. This was her new prison.

She reached for her tea as the warmth of the bath began to sooth the chill from her body. Warm fluid slid down her throat. Hot, sweet, perfect. Never had she so enjoyed tea.

Silent tears dripped down for only a moment. A weak hope dawned. However this event had come about, perhaps it was a good thing. Perhaps it was good that her family was going to England on an extended trip. She didn’t need the constant gossip, reproof, and pity.

She needed to find a way to procure her freedom. To see again. Being here may yet prove providential .

“Thank you. The tea is perfect.”

“You can have some more when you get out.”

A gentle hand unpinned the simple bun and brushed her hair far more gently than Marie ever did. “Your trunk will be here in an hour. We can fix your room to your liking after your tour. I will tell you everything there is to know about this old place.”

Clara, donned a nightgown that fit as if it belonged to her, sat on a feather bed with the scent of soft mint all about her.

“I’ve never cared for gaudy wall papers. This room’s walls are white-washed. Trim painted green. The braided rug on the floor is many-colored. I’ve had several

compliments on it.”

“Jenny’s granddaughter is working on a rug for her cabin.”

“How old is she?”

“Never asked, but she’s had gray hair as long as I can remember.”

“I meant Jenny’s granddaughter.”

“Somewhere around thirteen, I think.”

“I’m curious. Does your father allow them a sabbath?”

Clara thought for a moment, then nodded. “They have a church service sometimes, with the neighbor’s slaves. And as long as the singing stops by the time we get home, Mother doesn’t mind either.” Nothing strange about this.

“I’ve never owned a human being. Now, your wash stand is against the wall, across from the foot of your bed. I’ve set your chamber stool in the closet. We’ll use the set of pegs for your clothing and your trunk for the rest.”

“Is there a writing desk or bookshelves?”

“Do you think Marie packed for reading and writing?”

“Oh. I suppose not.”

“There is a soft horse hair chair by the fireplace, though it worries me. I’ll need to get a screen made for your safe keeping.”

“What color is the chair? ”

“Blue silk—faded by sunlight. It has a few stiff places, but a cushion should take care of that.”

Good. A room of her own and a chair to sit in. Was there more to life than that? The thought of a personal quiet space made her smile.

“I’ve been busy seeing you comfortable on your first evening here, I’ve quite forgotten about supper. Why don’t you have a rest until its ready?”

Mrs. Ramshaw could use a slave. They made life so much easier. Perhaps a little gentle convincing might change her mind.

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Clara listened to sparrow song from her bedroom window. The morning was considerably warmer than the previous day, and all windows had been flung open.

Mrs. Ramshaw knocked as she opened the door. “You have a visitor, Clara.”

Lucy’s gush of words and the rustle of her gown fell by her knees. “You’ll never guess. I’ve convinced Mother to let you go! She sent along a message for Ramshaw. She is to escort you to the ball for a full hour. How do you like that?”

Lucy sounded so pleased with herself. But no young lady in the whole of Harrodsburg or Lexington for that matter, wanted wrinkled Mrs. Ramshaw as an escort.

“Here, I’ve brought your gown.”

“Thank you, Lucy.” A large box landed in her lap. “You are a true sister to me.”

“You do have such a cozy room. I rather like it. Did you sleep well last night?”

“No, I didn’t. A cricket chirped all night long. The little pest will put a hole in my stockings, no doubt.” She’d have to ask Mrs. Ramshaw to find him.

Lucy laughed. “I’ll be looking for you tomorrow night. When you come, I’ll take your arm and leave Ramshaw to the other gossips that line the room.”

“A single hour, Mother says?” She couldn’t hide the disappointment.

“Between you and me, Mother paid Mrs. McPherson a visit and she asked particularly for you to come, that good music would certainly liven you up. I told Mother it would be an embarrassment to go against her wishes. I hope I did the right thing?”

Clara nodded. “But, Lucy, what of my hair?”

“I brought you my curling rolls. Now if you keep your hair in a simple bun like you have it, simply take these pieces from the side and one from the back and roll them, you’ll be very elegant. Your dress will be complemented with a simple hairstyle.”

“Perfect.” Doubt quickly crept in. The change in plan felt rather like impending doom.

“I’ve brought you my garnet necklace. A row of red will set off the blue silk. Christian will have only regrets when he sees you.”

Clara’s heart fluttered at the sound of his name. That he should still find her beautiful would certainly satisfy. She felt like Cinderella, cursed with a time-restraint. If only when the clock struck midnight, she’d return to her former self. If only she had until midnight.

“Mother waits in the carriage. I’m sorry to leave you—you must be lonely.”

“Not as lonely now as before. Thank you for coming, Lucy.” Clara stood and embraced her, barely surprised that her own mother didn’t want to come in for a moment.

DANIEL NICKED HIS LEFT cheek with his razor. Soap mixed into the wound and stung. “Darn it, cat. Another cut.”

The kitten rubbed against his leg and leapt to the wide windowsill. The runt didn't look like it was going to expire any time soon, and favored his bedroom as well as the kitchen. He bent to scratch behind its ears .

“Francine will call me soft when she sees you.” He wanted her to come, but was glad she wasn't here to see him make a fool of himself at the ball. His dancing skills were wanting. His spirits lacked fervor for such gatherings. A place for feminine entrapments, balls.

He rubbed the soap away with a towel, now dotted with blood, and practiced an air waltz.

“Should I get Mrs. Kilgore to help me, cat? Or should you go help her for a change?” The kitten leapt to catch and pounce his dancing feet.

“Oh no you don't. Out you go.” He gently shoved the creature out of his room with his foot and firmly shut the door.

The McPherson ball he'd been pressured into attending began at 6:30. He checked his pocket watch. Another twenty minutes and he'd be there shaking hands and God forbid, dancing.

He donned evening attire, and tried his best clerical face in the mirror.

Rotten piety no matter the expression, he must be an honest man with honest features.

Neither God nor a minister should be a person to fear.

Well, maybe one should fear God. Truly, the unrepentant ought to fear Him a great deal. But Daniel wasn't God.

A thought made him stand stock still, even as he still debated with himself in the echo of his mirror. Miss Gray, the beautiful. The lass perchance would be there. His heart knocked against his chest. Such an opportunity. He wiped his face with cool water.

Then again, the night might not be so bad. A perfect opportunity to show her that he was a true gentleman who didn't always stupidly stare when presented with a pie. He just might go calling on her. "Why not!" He said aloud.

"Yes, Mr. Merrick?" His cook called from below.

"Just preaching myself a sermon, pay me no mind!"

The ballroom heat settled about him, his dinner jacket hardly helped. Fine thing to sweat when one wanted to woo. The thought made him dizzy. Daniel bowed over a parishioner's hand. "Delighted to see you on this fine evening. "

The event filled Graham Springs Hotel to the brim. The music hadn't started yet, thank goodness. He wanted the chance to discover Miss Gray. Surely, the entire town was here! And more. The resort seemed to house and entertain many southern families making their grand escape before winter set in.

Tension drew up his neck, voices bounced from the ceiling and drummed into his head. He was surrounded but alone.

"Rev. Merrick, let me show you where the unwanted men are to lounge." A gray bearded parishioner, Mr. Fitch, led him down a long hall into a cigar-smoke filled room.

Unwanted? Did they think of him that way? Did they think a spiritual guide devoid of a romantic heart? Yet a mission might be found anywhere.

“Here is the real party, with real punch. I daresay you don’t object?”

Daniel held his hands wide open. “I withhold no pleasure from you.”

“Well, if anyone gets drunk, I’ll have a bucket of well water tossed on him.”

“Aha.” A minister such as himself couldn’t imbibe without raising eyebrows.

“I’m staying here. Join in if you like.”

“I think perhaps I shall, in a bit.” Real parties as he considered them—where could one be found?

On the dance floor or with the drinking gentlemen?

He doubted either. His most satisfying gatherings came while he attended seminary.

When professors and their wives invited him and others over for dinner and fireside discussion.

Times of heartfelt prayer unlike any he’d been able to offer from the pulpit.

He wished upon wish to experience this kind of gathering again.

The man chuckled. “Enjoy your look at the ladies. When you’re married you gotta stop. ”

“I beg your pardon?”

The man boisterously laughed as he clapped another man on the shoulder and took a glass of wine from a servant.

Daniel meandered back down the hall to the ballroom. His first sight at the entry was indeed Miss Gray. One of the young slave girls took her wrap and bonnet. Peach silk fit neatly about her. Red hair arranged in a stunning fashion. A flower well-worth his attention.

The palms of his hands broke out in a sweat. He wiped them on his pant legs and shoved on his white gloves. He was about to greet her when a young man came protectively behind her. Held her elbow, no less. This was not their first meeting.

Her face turned and beamed at the young man who smiled back. The gentleman fairly glistened with pomade.

Daniel greeted them anyway. All's fair in love and war. Not that he loved anyone yet. "How do you do, Miss Gray? I trust your aunt is well?"

"All of my aunts are hale and hearty, I thank you." She offered a wide smile. "May I introduce you to Henry Childers?"

Childers nodded.

"He's an expert horseman. Perhaps you two should talk."

Of all the...Daniel's face grew hot and sweat trickled down his scalp. A merry twinkle flashed in her eyes. He smiled past embarrassment. "I'm afraid Miss Gray must have noticed my need for training."

Mr. Childers threw his comment with his chin, "You can't live in Kentucky and not know how to ride a horse. It's a man's duty."

"Indeed." He bowed and excused himself. He walked clear across the room to the punch table. Far and away from the realm of patronization and embarrassment. To

think he entertained the thought of wooing her! Posh.

He picked up a dainty cup of punch and swallowed it back with a gulp.

Good heavens, there was the blind girl, Miss Stanton.

Odd that she should be here. What was the point?

Her blue gown that draped to the floor reminded him of tropical flowers he'd seen in a famous New York greenhouse.

Her simple beauty, no one would find wanting.

Mrs. Ramshaw encircled her arm about Miss Stanton, leading her to the back of the room. Such a strange pair.

The young lady held herself erect, her expression daring anyone to talk to her.

Perhaps this was his time to do some good. He stepped forward. "Mrs. Ramshaw, I didn't know you were coming. Excellent."

"I don't approve of dancing and such, but I don't mind a good party. Have you met Clara?"

"I have not had that pleasure."

"Clara, this is Reverend Daniel Merrick, the new minister. You've heard him preach."

She offered her hand and he took it. "Pleasure to finally meet you. How long have you been in our town?"

Her countenance pinched like the edge of a blade. Like a woman, scorned. Beautiful, for certain, but sharp. “A few weeks at the most.” He squeezed her hand, a sign of release.

“Clara! There you are.” Her sister rushed to her side and linked arms.

“Lucy. Please excuse us, Mrs. Ramshaw. Reverend, I am sure we will meet again.” She dipped in a curtsy and allowed Lucy to steer her away. The two joined a larger circle of girls their own age.

Daniel offered his arm to Mrs. Ramshaw, no doubt as reluctant to be here as he. “How does Miss Stanton get on? I’ve heard she will never regain her sight.”

“I don’t know yet. She’s been rather private about the whole situation. She’ll be under my wing for these several months to come. I consider myself fortunate. She needs me.”

“Under your wing? ”

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“Her family travels to England and have decided the journey too dangerous for her to attempt.”

“Ah. She is to live with you, then?”

“Moved into my spare room not two days ago.”

He spotted her across the room. Her head leaned slightly, listening. A young man seemed to be asking her to dance. A kind decline. And there was Miss Gray, she turned and smiled. At him?

Ramshaw’s voice broke in. “We are only here for a short time. Her mother has bidden her here for but an hour. It hardly seems fair. I preferred not to come if it only be a hour. Won’t you come visit us for supper this evening?” She patted his arm. “Her spirit is crushed. I know it is.”

“Pardon me?” Daniel realized he’d been thinking of someone else’s smile.

Mrs. Ramshaw repeated her invitation. “It would be very Christian of you. Of course, stay a while longer. We shall be ready by eight or so.”

All he could do was thank her and agree to come. He bowed and made his way around the room, partly to see if he might encounter Miss Gray again. Despite his finagling, he saw only a scrap of her gown as she danced in the throng.

The music began a new song just as the grandfather clock somewhere in the hotel struck the half hour with an ancient warble. He glanced over heads and partners as

they swirled about the room.

The slow waltz would no doubt speed up. His eye caught a portion of that Henry Childer's jacket and the fancy sweep to the back of his hair.

Daniel stepped back. And another man, standing behind an overgrown plant as though hiding from someone.

Who? He took another step back and felt his heel go right into someone's foot.

"I beg your pardon!" He turned to find the rather controlled expression of Miss Stanton, still on the arm of her sister. Punch had spilled completely down her blue silk finery. His fault entirely .

"Not at all." Though ashamed at the thought, for a moment he was glad she couldn't see his face.

"LUCY, TAKE ME TO THE ladies lounge. Quickly."

"It isn't so bad, I'll give you my fan to hide it."

Clara hissed through a smile. "People expect me to be a mess." The blind girl can't help herself. "Has Christian seen me?"

"I haven't seen him. Perhaps he isn't coming."

"It's just as well."

Clara felt for the round ottoman and sat down, spreading many layers of skirts beneath her. Punch dampened the bodice. She imagined its blood-red stain.

“What color is it?”

“It is rather dark. What if you put on a shawl, I can fetch it for you?”

“It’s no use, Lucy. I really don’t belong here. I can’t accept any dances and I know they are offered out of pity, not desire. No one truly expects it. I’d look hideous tripping around out there.”

Lucy’s voice came soft and close to her ear. “Guard your tongue, Belle just walked in with Julie and Lena.”

Belle’s voice rang as clear as her name.

“I heard mother talking to Mrs. Stanton. Christian Grant considers courting Lucy instead. I tell you, he’s still after the Stanton land.

The family is keeping it from Clara. Word is that they plan for him to join them in London so a courtship can begin abroad.

I know I would certainly wish to marry higher than that . ”

Clara stood, weakly but for an ounce of pride she might sling in her own defense. She found she had nothing to say. Words failed. Belle’s shrill voice disappeared back into the ballroom where music and laughter mocked all genuine feeling .

Lucy’s small, timid voice slipped within her ear. “I do not want him, Clara. I do not wish for this courtship.”

Was she no longer a visible part of her family?

All this time, Lucy had encouraged her, flattered her, supposedly prayed to God on

her behalf.

Why keep such a secret? How often did people lie to appease her?

To soften a horrible situation. But Lucy's betrayal stung.

She'd been shoved aside, deceived. Replaced.

Clara stood. "Take me to Mrs. Ramshaw. I need to go."

"Clara, please understand. I do not want him to come. I plan on falling in love with someone else. I promise I will! Father, he—"

Ah, but she didn't know Christian. His tender ways would get to her. He'd woo her. Marry her. No, the plan was set. She had been simply a business deal. Lucy would be too. She almost pitied her.

Lucy touched Clara's shoulder and pulled lightly at her sleeve in the direction she requested.

Though she was gentle and said little except for where to turn, it took great willpower not to jerk away.

She should have been able to trust the only family member that seemed to understand the depth of her pain. But she was deceived.

Clara removed her hand from her sodden bodice and let the dark stain be seen. It did not matter. Let them play games if they would, she would stand in truth. Blind, rejected, and stained truth.

She resolved a test to play upon her kind hostess. If Mrs. Ramshaw failed to be as

true as Clara's stained bodice, other plans must be made.

"Poor dear. I hear she spills all manner of things—ruined her finest muslin with ink..." Mrs. McPherson assumed she could not hear. Like so many others.

"I've also soiled Mother's best table cloth with wine, have you not heard this as well, Mrs. MacPherson?" Clara mustered a cunning smile.

Lucy led them through a large crowd of people. Clara felt the jab of more than a few errant elbows. Then, they stopped .

"Oh, Clara." A disapproving tone met her ears.

More betrayal. She'd been led to Mother. "Lucy, I asked you to bring me directly to Mrs. Ramshaw."

"I have." Lucy sighed. "They are standing together."

A shawl was quickly tossed around her shoulders, her mother gripped her hand. "You can't be seen in such a dreadful state."

"Too late for that, Mother. Mrs. McPherson is spreading the embarrassing news all about the room this moment."

"You must go back with Mrs. Ramshaw directly."

"I want nothing else, I assure you." That wasn't entirely true. "Mother—I..."

Her voice grew tight and direct in her ear. "You must stay with Mrs. Ramshaw, stay where you can—"

The minister's voice interrupted, "Once again, I beg you to accept my humblest apology. I hope I haven't ruined your dress."

"My dress is not what is ruined. Mrs. Ramshaw, I am ready to go."

Mother tucked the shawl tightly about her. "Do as you are told, Clara." Father's words, stolen for times such as these, when Mother could find no other.

Lucy's small voice pled, "Clara? I will write to you. I promise."

"If you wish. Mother, give Grandmother my love. Fare well."

Mrs. Ramshaw's now familiar arm crept through hers again. "Let's get you home and resting in front of the hearth."

Clara, led once again, left her family. She felt her spirit sail far away from them, as surely as they planned to sail from her.

DANIEL STARED AFTER her for a long moment.

He'd soiled her lovely blue silk that no doubt cost a fortune and a seamstress ten sore fingers.

And ruined her singular hour of entertainment to boot—all because he was fool enough to play the lover's game of flirtation.

If Miss Gray had tossed him a smile, he ought not have taken it to heart. Especially with a beau on her arm.

Or perhaps he had made more of it than was there. At any rate, his foolishness caused a premature end to Clara's party. Why there had been a limitation, he could hardly

guess.

Francine might give him advice as to how to repair his mistake. Then again, it was she who had personally forbidden him to have anything to do with women after that stupid incident. How blind he'd been.

He had resolved to focus on his ministry, not get carried away by the first peachy smile that favored him.

Heavens. He'd momentarily forgotten he was supposed to dine with Mrs. Ramshaw and Clara in one hour's time.

The violins began a new striking tune, the shrill notes pierced—his head was the drum. He rubbed his temples. How stupidity gave one a headache! He made his way to the men's lounge. Cigar and pipe smoke floated about the room, no matter that the wide windows stood open.

The men were embroiled in a political debate. Not the conversation for the new minister to enjoy, lest he be put on the spot. He did not want or need suspicion from any direction.

Neither did he desire a wall in front of their hearts when he preached on Sunday. He needed his people open to hearing truth. Another time perhaps.

He slipped out of the room through an oversized window and onto the porch. A few couples and older men sat around in wicker furniture, fanning away flies. Slave women with trays of lemonade stood at the ready.

He took one and swallowed as quickly as he had the punch. There was Miss Gray again, alone with two other females. His heart failed to flutter .

Though the time was still early for dinner, he made his way to Mrs. Ramshaw's. He was supposed to be a means of cheer for Clara tonight. They would likely wish him away as well.

But one could not doubt God's potential work in the mundane, anything from a dinner to an accidental punch spill. He regretted his silliness, but if he truly believed the words he cherished daily, then by his love for the Lord, all things would work together for good. Even this.

MRS. RAMSHAW AND CLARA spoke little on the way home. And only a little more when helping her into a clean, unstained gown. She left her by the hearth as promised.

Clara imagined a single candle flickering in the darkness, a low glow from the fire. Were there more candles? Maybe she should ask.

Dishes and pots rattled in the kitchen. A rich scent filled the room.

Her only friend had been deceiving her. As had her entire family. But Lucy? Clara's stomach still hurt. The one sister who seemed to care snaked around her roiling emotions and at just the right moment, squeezed hard.

Her family could do nothing more to catch her unaware.

For a moment, she regretted going to the ball in the first place, but then, she'd never know the full falsity of her family.

The fact that they denied her worth made her feel the richer for the knowledge, though not happier.

It was power she needed at the moment, and the evening events were road signs

indicating which path she must take.

She smiled a little. Fate had brought her to Mrs. Ramshaw. Much solitude would be expected. In solitude, plans might be made. Though what they should contain in her dark world, she hadn't the slightest notion. But the fact that she could make them set her wheels turning, however slowly .

But first things first, she must know whom to trust. Without that, she had nothing.

Mrs. Ramshaw shoved a pillow behind her back and added another by her side. "Glad to see some color back in your face. Too many people in a room is unhealthy, I say."

"What about church? There are many people there."

"Worship is healthy. I've a bit more to do. You rest."

Why not? That's all she'd been doing for days on end.

Clara rearranged the pillows. The evening had grown quite cool and her feet pinched in the slippers she'd forgotten to remove with the ball gown. She slipped them off and rubbed her feet. If she could get closer to the fire it would be such a relief.

She ran her hands down her gown. Mrs. Ramshaw had pulled the dark blue wool from the peg. She knelt to the ground and felt around the floor. There was a braided rug. Good. Crawling on the floor wouldn't brown her skirts.

Her hands found a tea table. If she just scooted on her hands and knees, she'd feel for the heat and be safe enough. A thud puffed somewhere nearby. "Mrs. Ramshaw?" She didn't answer.

A draft crept around her hands and feet, but just beyond, warmth already reached her

face. She put her hand slowly out to it, brought her legs beneath her and slowly began to stand.

Large gloved hands caught her wrists. Clara cried out, “Oh! Who is here? Speak.”

“Don’t fret yourself.” A low, calm voice steadied her. “Here, let me guide you. Did you want a chair by the fire?”

The minister. He’d been watching her. He seated her as though she might break. What choice did she have? To be seen on her hands and knees like a cripple! Humiliating fodder for more gossip.

“Please forgive me, I did not know anyone was here or I would not have created such a fuss.”

“You made no fuss that I saw, but you’ll have to forgive me for breaking into your privacy. I failed to announce myself. I didn’t see anyone in the room at first.”

Clara whispered. “Please do not tell Mrs. Ramshaw I was on the ground. She’ll not give me a moment’s peace.”

“You have my word, Miss Stanton. I again apologize for being unspeakably clumsy with my punch. I daresay I doused your fun in the worst way possible.”

“Actually, I am grateful for your clumsiness.” Without an excuse to leave, she would have been trapped by an endless, vicious circulation of gossip.

“Is that so?”

“Now I am here, where I am meant to be, and not in the land of the living, where life is merry.”

“And you are truly glad?”

“Yes.”

“You did not care to go to the ball? I thought for certain your evening was spoiled.”

Clara paused for a moment. She didn’t dare lie to a minister. “Not anymore.”

The gloved hand was now ungloved as it touched the top of hers. “If you mean that this is the land of the dead, and therefore, Heaven, I might say you exaggerate. But to compare this home to hell, well, that would have to be of your own making, not of circumstance.”

“I did not mean it like that...I...”

“I assure you, Mrs. Ramshaw and I are very much alive and happy.”

“I am grateful to be here. Before you came, I was thinking just that.”

“Have I rattled you? My sister would have jabbed me in the ribs before now.”

His voice smiled. Did he ?

The kitchen door swung open. “Reverend Merrick, you are just in time!”

“Here, let me carry that to the table for you.”

“The biscuits are hot this time. Not all cold like on the Sabbath. Help Clara to the dining room, won’t you? She doesn’t know her way there yet.”

Clara stood from her chair and made her way past the kitchen door, near the dining

room entrance and paused.

“I believe you are my responsibility.” Reverend Merrick took her hand and placed it in his arm. He seated her gently. Kindly. Just as Christian had done so many times before and would soon do again for Lucy.

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Mrs. Ramshaw had one more dish to fetch so Daniel gazed freely at Clara's face.

At least ten extravagant candles lit the room in a mismatched grouping of candlesticks, one he could swear was meant to hold yarn.

The golden flames highlighted Miss Stanton's cold, pensive expression with a warmth she needed within.

This girl was not at all happy with her circumstances. He couldn't blame her. How would he respond if he'd become blind? He shook that thought. His very livelihood depended on the healing words of God. Words that made the blind to see and the lame to walk.

He attempted conversation. "I heard that your family sails for England in two days."

"Yes."

"What will your father do with the household while away?"

"I am not sure."

Mrs. Ramshaw entered with a basket of hot, steaming biscuits and plunked them on the table. His mouth instantly watered. No mood could remain hopeless in the presence of hot biscuits, pork roast, and whipped potatoes. His guilt about spilt punch evaporated in the presence of good food.

Mrs. Ramshaw placed a large biscuit on his plate and one on Clara's. "Mr. Stanton

has sent half of the slaves to the neighboring farm and the other half will be ruled by an apprentice overseer. A young coot with less sense than a pigeon. ”

Clara stifled a snort. “I see you are well versed in my family affairs.”

Mrs. Ramshaw perched on the edge of her chair. “Your mother told me about it, dear. As for the young coot, I know his parents.” She patted the young woman’s hand. Clara hid it beneath the table.

A good thing that Mr. Stanton takes his leave. So abused she could no longer hold her bowels... He couldn’t shake Mrs. Ramshaw’s raw truth about these men, these community leaders. Though many women suffered, these had no escape... Daniel cleared his throat. “Shall I pray?” The food was cooling.

“By all means.”

He bowed his head with Mrs. Ramshaw. Then childishly peeked to see if Clara had bowed. He did so because he genuinely cared for the state of her spirit. Thankfully, she had, but her blind eyes remained wide open. Staring. He supposed it made no difference. But did the girl pray?

He certainly did. Words, short and sweet. One should not spoil a rich blessing by preaching sin and sorrow over it. Or mulling over a sorrow he couldn’t immediately fix. He filled his plate perhaps more than he should have, but Mrs. Ramshaw didn’t mind. Knew him to be the hungry man that he was.

Clara didn’t eat much and took only small bites. Her head slightly tipped as if not wanting to be seen. He wondered if she had enough food. Sometimes girls were finicky like that. Francine didn’t eat before balls and galas. Perhaps Clara still harbored nerves from the event.

Mrs. Ramshaw spoke through a biscuit. "I planned on reading to Clara, but I find the print too small. I was hoping you would oblige." Crumbs tumbled down her bodice.

"Only if Miss. Stanton wishes."

Clara lay down her biscuit. "I used to read a great deal before the accident. "

Was that a hint of hope? A reminder of better days?

"Pilgrim's Progress ," Mrs. Ramshaw said. "Nothing else can suit a young woman."

Daniel shook his head. "What? And have her miss out on great literature?"

"I suppose The Wide, Wide World mightn't harm her."

"I believe, Mrs. Ramshaw, that we must ask Clara what she prefers."

More discussion over and about her. Finally, and acknowledgement of her presence. Clara had laid down her fork and rubbed her hands together. "I dare not inconvenience you. A minister such as yourself must have a great deal to occupy his hours."

"I am often on the run, from one sick parishioner to another. But I am also frequently here on Sunday afternoons."

Did he really want to commit to reading to her every Sunday? One day, he would declare from the pulpit that preachers needed a day of rest too.

Clara remained silent.

"It shall be no trouble, Miss Stanton. I insist on knowing what you would like to

hear.”

“I have read all of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. Shakespeare...”

“I’ll go by the booksellers and see if there’s anything tempting. I promise no book of sermons. I’m sure you get enough of that on Sunday mornings.” He smiled and wished she could see him.

She nodded. Not with a frown, but with that same thoughtful expression. And another minute bite of potatoes.

Mrs. Ramshaw poured more gravy on her own pile of potatoes. “I should like to know why a book of sermons is not acceptable? Indeed. I should find them very interesting.”

“They are only interesting to the interested, Mrs. Ramshaw. ”

Clara allowed the hint of a smile to cross her face. The old lady took a bite of potatoes. Daniel loosened his necktie.

CLARA COULDN’T WAIT to get into her nightgown and away from the pities of the preacher and Mrs. Ramshaw. The mention of reading forced upon her another loss she had not yet confronted.

Her ridiculous attempt to charm Christian at the ball left her with nothing but humiliation. Was Christian even there? Did he see her and avoid her? She’d heard no word of him except paired with Lucy’s name in the lounge. Perhaps he stared at her silently from a secret place.

And now the old biddy and preacher wanted to guide her with good books of their choosing. So much for them, they can do their Christian duty. She should be grateful,

but she nearly hated the thought. More reliance on others.

It was well enough for the characters in books to have tales end well. None of the heroines had become blind. They always, always got what they wanted in the end. They had stamina, fortitude, and blessed sight. A handsome man to love and to love them back.

Her hands missed the hard covers and many pages of a dream world that felt so much like her own.

“Please come as often as you can, Reverend Merrick.” Mrs. Ramshaw held Clara tight by the elbow in the foyer.

“I’ll stop by tomorrow for our book discussion, Miss Stanton.”

A large, warm hand lifted hers in a weak squeeze. “Did I forget to mention how lovely you two ladies looked this evening? Forgive me for failing to do so.”

Mrs. Ramshaw removed her hand from her elbow. “I am no flower, Reverend Merrick, and my black silk is as old as my husband’s been in the grave. Clara, however showed unusual beauty this night. I don’t believe any other debutantes matched her. ”

“Indeed. Quite difficult not to notice.”

“You don’t have to flatter me, I’d rather have truth or nothing at all. I can handle the fact that—”

“I wasn’t raised to flatter a girl, Miss Stanton. And now I wish you both good night.”

She curtsied by instinct. Felt the heat of shame creep up her neck. The door thudded.

Mrs. Ramshaw gently patted her back. “Now. I’ve got the brick warming your bed and your gown warming by the fire. Need you a cup of tea?”

“Mrs. Ramshaw?”

“Yes, Clara?”

Clara opened her mouth to speak but there was too much to say.

Her words drowned by familiar dark pain.

She shook her head and the old panic rose to the surface before she could tamp it down.

Her breath became short, her chest squeezed.

A forever nothingness...forever. “I can’t live.

.. I can’t... I can’t live blind.” She heard her own whispers.

No matter how soft, they were spoken aloud. True and unchanging.

She sank to the floor and gripped the old woman’s skirts. With ridiculous shame, she wept into them like a slave child does to its mother.

The old woman managed to get down to the floor with her.

She didn’t speak for a while and when Clara’s sobs softened, she heard Mrs. Ramshaw weeping too.

The only consolation was the pair of arms that held her tightly.

Clara felt the realness, the empathy of the lady's tears.

As if Mrs. Ramshaw suffered the same affliction.

No one had held her like this before. Not even her mother. ..

Clara finally pulled away. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Unlike her parents, Mrs. Ramshaw offered no wisdom or remonstrance for her lack of complete composure. She simply led her to the practical warmth of bed and nightgown.

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Daniel woke the next morning stiff from the cold and with a bad taste in his mouth. “Sunday.” He blinked his eyes in the gray light, the sun not yet risen.

As he lay still, he thought of the previous evening. Of Miss Gray and how he’d stared after her. He hoped no one noticed his interest. Sometimes a simple glance gave way to gossip. Perhaps wagging tongues were unavoidable. As Francine had been so good to remind him in her last letter.

Then that ridiculous punch spill down Miss Stanton’s gown, and his further foolish attempt to cheer her. Obviously, she couldn’t wait to be rid of him last night. Somehow, he’d gotten tangled up in doing a good deed for a girl who didn’t care for his company.

Well, like it or not, he happened to enjoy Mrs. Ramshaw’s and her food, so she would just have to put up with him.

He would by no means fail to read to her.

He smiled. He was good at reading and she might learn to enjoy it.

Perhaps the nut would not be so hard to crack, and her soul may prove to be open to kindness—and Christ himself.

He swiped a hand across his eyes. Pride, how well he knew its presence. “Get it out of me, Lord. Help me to stop glorying in my prospective success.”

Cat mewed outside his door.

Daniel put his feet onto the icy, cold floor and fairly ran to stoke the coals in the kitchen hearth.

CLARA HATED HERSELF the next morning. Mrs. Ramshaw likely thought her mentally ill.

She mustn't show any weakness, if she wanted independence.

More breakdowns could lead her to a stint in an insane asylum.

Her straight white teeth pulled out and her arms forced into horrible jackets that tie only in the back.

Poor lady must have cried from having to bend down so far. Yes. That was the cause.

It was Sunday, and Mrs. Ramshaw had already tapped on her door reminding her of the ten o'clock service. Being seen by society again hardly mattered. Not many would attend church after such a late night. In fact, she and Mrs. Ramshaw along with a few older people might be the only ones seen.

Only sit and endure another of Reverend Merrick's sermons.

She rose and put on her most comfortable dress. Since she had grown thinner, she found that it fit perfectly with a rather loose corset. She needed help with this.

A knock pounded from downstairs.

"Who comes at such an hour? Before church, no less."

"Miz Ramshaw? The missus sent me to help you with Miz Clara. She says to tell you I can cook for you and do all the washin'. I got my gran girl, she can help keep me

an' stay outta trouble. The missus say if you are agreeable, she can stay."

"I declare."

Clara had never heard Mrs. Ramshaw come even close to swearing before. The fact that Jenny was here lifted her heart. A piece of home...

Bottles rattled together as though being set down. "Here be some of dat healin' spring water for Miz Clara."

"I do not keep slaves, I do not hold to that way of life."

"Ever' body's got their ways."

"Return to Mrs. Stanton and tell her you should remain home. "

Jenny's voice dropped to a whisper. Clara could not hear what she was saying. But the next thing she knew, the trio was climbing the stairs.

"Good thing I have another spare room. The window leaks a little, but I daresay shan't do you any harm. We like to keep warm in this house, so feel free to make a fire as often as you wish."

"I seen your wood pile. Me and Morrie, we keep each other warm."

"Nonsense, I'll send to the Stanton farm for extra wood. They won't deny me."

Clara opened her door wide. "Jenny?"

"Miz Clara, I gots you some cookies. Had to hide 'em from Lewis. Poor man won't know what to do without my cookin'."

“Come here, Jenny. Come here.” She reached outward to feel her familiar hands. Arms drew Clara close to her small form and patted her back.

“What’s this? You only been gone from me a week.”

Mrs. Ramshaw spoke. “Moriah, do you know how to read?”

“No ma’am.”

“Then you shall be taught. Go ahead, settle in. Clara and I are off to church. When we return, the reverend will come with us.”

“I’ll have dinner on th’ table.”

“No, Jenny, I shall have dinner on the table. You shall do nothing at the moment but settle in and wait for our return.”

Clara piped up, “Jenny is an excellent cook, Mrs. Ramshaw.”

“I do not doubt it.”

The day seemed brighter with Jenny and her granddaughter come to stay. Almost as if she had not been completely abandoned—though they were slaves and not the least blood-related.

They walked to church in comfortable silence. She heard very few people milling about—all the better. Less stares and whispers to endure .

Mrs. Ramshaw clucked her tongue. “Only three carriages by the church. Shame, shame, shame.”

If Clara had been dancing until past two in the morning, as she had in the past, she would most certainly still be abed. With aching feet and light heart and breakfast brought up on a tray past noon. “Is it better to fall asleep in church or stay home where sleeping in is acceptable?”

“Posh. One should remember the Sabbath and not just on the Sabbath.”

The organ played a low tune as they stepped over the threshold. Would her family be in attendance?

Mrs. Ramshaw whispered, “It’s practically empty in here. Pay close attention to Daniel’s sermon so that we might discuss it at luncheon.”

Clara slowly nodded. Of course, Mrs. Ramshaw would do all the talking. She need only nod and agree with whatever they said.

DANIEL’S HEART HADN’T slowed down yet. He had preached with more fervor than usual today and it left him in a sweat.

Passion always seemed to come easier with fewer people in the sanctuary.

It was exhilarating, it was disappointing.

Why didn’t this happen every Sunday? The passion—not the poor turnout.

He changed out of his vestments and stood at the pump at the back of the church and pushed the heavy handle to let cold water gush over his handkerchief.

He wiped his face, grabbed his pile of books and started up the hill to Mrs. Ramshaw’s house.

Time to sacrifice a good portion of his own day of rest. Not that he minded.

Miss Stanton sat rocking on the porch, a shawl draped across her small shoulders. If he wasn't mistaken, one of her father's slaves sat on the ground next to her, mending a sock. Strange sight.

"Hello, Miss Stanton. "

She bowed her head in reply. Formal thing, that one.

"What shall it be today? Fairy tales? A revisit to Shakespeare?"

She bent her head in thought. "I know not."

CLARA SAT ALONE IN the front parlor, among a much-pillowed bench, so deep in proportions that she recalled avoiding the wide seat on previous calls. It made her legs stick out like a wooden doll. Frightfully unladylike.

Reverend Merrick cleared his throat more than once. And sniffled, and sniffled again.

"Are you warm enough, Miss Stanton?"

"I am not an invalid."

"Does that mean you are warm, and would rather not be bothered by my query?"

"If I am a little cold, I can't become more blind than I am. I am not bothered bodily, other than by my blindness."

"My nose is cold and I wish I had an extra coat just now. Perhaps Mrs. Ramshaw can spare us a cup of tea?"

Clara readjusted a pillow. “Alright then...perhaps I am rather chilled. I am just so tired of people thinking I am completely ill.”

“Our fellow man can be strange with his thoughts, I daresay I’ve had my share of gossip and whatnot. We all have, Miss Stanton. You may have escaped it until now, but vicious words would have come to hurt you sooner or later, blindness or not.”

“A fact of life, is it?” More tragic words.

Daniel’s voice lowered a notch. “A fact for which gives me another reason to do what I do.”

Clara readjusted another pillow. It hadn’t struck her before. Clearly, being a minister was more than an occupation for this man. Maybe he fancied that it granted him a certain nobility. Or perhaps he was like the impassioned, emotional preachers that came blazing through town sometimes.

Her parents had laughed at them. As had she and her sisters.

Daniel cleared his throat again. “Ah, Mrs. Ramshaw comes. I daresay she read our minds from the other room.”

A tea tray rattled close and was placed within distance. Mrs. Ramshaw clipped her words, “I am not a spiritist, Reverend. I trust you saw our company?”

“Ah, yes.”

“They are from Clara’s household, loaned to be my slaves.”

“Extra help may be a blessing,” Daniel said.

Mrs. Ramshaw laughed low. "I needed no help, yet, I am glad they are here. See how Clara has brightened by their presence? I'm going to teach the young one to read."

Clara stiffened. Teach Morrie to read? Was that lawful? Why should she bother about it? Or care?

Reverend Merrick voiced her question. "Will Mr. Stanton approve?"

She herself had a ready answer. "Father isn't here, so his opinion hardly matters." How strange, that words now locked to her would be opened to a slave... How could she begrudge Morrie's mind being freed?

Clara felt Mrs. Ramshaw's knotty fingers lift her own hands to balance a saucer and cup. "Made from spring water, mind you. I've filled your cup half-way so you won't spill down your dress. I'm sure Reverend Merrick won't mind pouring more for you?"

"No, ma'am. Not at all."

Clara gave an understanding nod. A backwards party. Where the man had to pour and entertain. Mother would find this ridiculous and require Jenny to serve.

"I'll be in the kitchen with the other ladies. The doors are wide open should you need anything. "

Ladies? Didn't she mean the slaves? No one ever called a slave a lady.

How odd. Clara set the saucer aside and fit her hand around her cup while Reverend Merrick warmed his hands and sipped his tea for a moment.

What did he look like? Was he handsome? Probably not.

It didn't matter anyway. Christian might still come to his senses.

Besides, girls like her didn't marry boring preachers.

But he wasn't altogether boring, was he?

She sipped her tea for another moment and her thoughts about his looks continued. She remembered how the doctor showed her how to see with the tips of her fingers. Never would she take such liberties. Such a thing was much too intimate. She might never know.

Maybe he had a large hooked nose and bulging eyes. A regular beast. A smile tipped the corners of her mouth.

"What is so funny?" Humor tinged his voice. "I don't recall saying anything amusing."

"My thoughts rather ran away from me."

"A dreamer, are you?"

"I...yes."

"Joseph was a dreamer too. Well now, let's begin. I'll question you on my sermon. Ready?"

A great big hooked nose. And crooked teeth too. Absolutely.

"I jest, Miss Stanton. I came here to entertain you with words, not bore you into oblivion. Unless you don't find the Bible boring, we can go with that instead."

Clara forced a smile this time. “I find neither Dickens nor the Bible uninteresting.”

“Dickens it is.”

She heard him snatch a book from somewhere and leaf through the first pages.

“Oh, Miss Stanton, you are out of tea.” His hand came beneath her two that held the cup. A slow, gentle pouring and fresh steam joined with her breath .

“Thank you.” She looked toward his voice.

“And now, without delay, I shall begin our literary journey. By the way, I haven’t read this yet so we will both be entertained.”

Clara sat back among the pillows and forced herself to be calm, and maybe even enjoy this moment. The last time she’d heard or read a story had been before the accident. Months ago. No one had bothered since.

His voice did not take on authority like it did in the pulpit. Instead, the flow of words waved like a calm ocean. Even, interested, careful. By the end of an hour’s reading, his voice began to get rusty. Yet he continued.

She moved slowly forward to reach for his arm, only to touch it lightly. She reached outward, and into her hand came his.

“Miss Stanton?”

“Your voice is tired. I think perhaps you might want some more tea yourself.”

“I confess, I am so interested in the story, I’d go on till I croak.”

“I want to pour.”

“Ah... are you sure?”

“Of course.” Her smile expanded. Why wait on others to do what she was still capable of?

She felt for the tea table. Found his cup.

Found the handle of the tea pot. She’d done this hundreds of times.

She poured only a moment before lifting the spout and lifting his teacup, handed it to him.

“See? Easy as pie.” There. She wasn’t completely deficient like everyone thought.

“Well done. Now tell me, what do you think of the story thus far?” He listened to her thoughts like he had all the time in the world.

DANIEL HASTENED FROM evening service, to which even fewer people had ventured. His vocal passion wasn’t quite as stirring. After the dead silence of the pews, he needed to experience some vibrant life.

His horse had no problems, no ailments, no long history of human frailties. Only energy and a life in the fresh air.

He met the stableman at the door of his cottage. His hair stuck out in the back and one suspender hung limp by his leg. Apparently, he’d interrupted a nap.

“Saddle her up, will you.”

“Will do, Reverend.”

He smiled back and inwardly sighed. If the whole town laughed at his riding, what did it matter? Ah, but it always did, as his personal history warned.

Minutes later, he rode slowly towards the Stanton farm quite unintentionally. He remembered the few tips the stableman had been kind enough to spare.

Perhaps the horse wanted to go home, back to the open pasture.

He patted her neck and she began to trot a bit quicker than he liked.

His balance wavered. If he was going to make a bigger impact in the life of his parish, he and this horse needed to get along.

At least he didn't have to worry about Miss Stanton seeing how foolish he looked.

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While Clara tried to view herself as feminine and capable as ever, she spent much of her time idle, allowing Jenny to dote on her, serve her and take her for walks around the town square. Often she felt like a show horse being led about for the entertainment of others.

This particular morning, the dew had been extra heavy and November's chill enough to make Mrs. Ramshaw's bones ache.

As a result, Jenny spent her morning over the kitchen kettle making chicken and dumplings, the poultry a present from the Stanton farm.

Clara sat in boredom smelling the wafting savory scent.

It was destined to be a lonely day. Reverend Merrick, her reader was not due for a few more days and waiting on the outcome of the story was a downright frustration.

Seeing—strike that—hearing him was somewhat pleasing as well.

Jenny shuffled close by. “Yo family must be clear across the ocean by now.”

“Another week and they’ll be at Grandmother’s.”

“Does yo grandmother talk like yo mother?”

Clara put on her best English accent. “Quite the same, enough to mistake them for one another.”

“I’m glad you ‘merican, Miss Clara. Sounds better.”

“I don’t know, I rather think an English accent is quite dignified. Makes a man more handsome. ”

“How a man sounds when he speaks don’ mattah. It’s what he does with his speaks, ain’t that the truth.” Her voice sounded serious.

“Can I tell you a secret? I very nearly hate Christian, Jenny. I know it is terrible of me.”

“That preacher’ll be onto you about forgiven ‘im.”

“You know, don’t you? That he’s after Lucy? My dear family still wants the rogue around despite what he did to me. They invited him to sail to England with them.”

“I hears a lot, Miss Clara. I hear moren’ I want to sometime. And I hear other things too. Things ‘at people don’t always say.”

Clara put her hands behind her head and raked her fingers through her long hair. She hadn’t bothered to put it up. She felt a bit girlish—like an old fashioned bride wearing her hair down one last time.

She twisted one end and let it drop. Her parents probably preferred her dead and a wreath made of her crowning glory.

She imagined her hair twisted into submission—as delicate flowers encircling a shadow likeness set within a deep shadow box to hang on their wall, a symbol of mourning but with the subject already forgotten.

A knock sounded.

“I gets it.”

Jenny wasn't gone but a moment. “Dat Belle McPherson is here to see you.”

Clara started. She hadn't received a caller since the accident, if you didn't count Reverend Merrick.

“Jenny, I must be a mess.”

“Here, I winds your hair right quick. Don't move now.”

“It's my old gown. She'll think I'm a beggar.”

“You a Stanton girl, ain't no mistakin' that.”

A moment later, Clara sat in the parlor with her visitor, whose greeting flowed as thick as honey. An invitation for a fly to drown .

“I promised your mother I'd come see how you were. Honestly, I don't know how time has escaped, it's been a month since the ball.”

“How are you, Belle? Was the ball successful?” Not that she cared a whit.

“I've had more callers than I wish, to tell the truth.”

Clara couldn't help picturing her insipid smile. “Oh? Anyone I know?”

“James Taylor, for one.”

“Oh, how did you manage that?”

“Father gave him a good price on tobacco.”

Was courtship always a business deal? “Do you like him well enough?”

“Well enough, but I won’t marry him, not when I’ve so many superior choices.”

Choices...one of those freedoms fortune had stifled in her case. “But James Taylor’s mansion rivals the George estate in Richmond. I’ve been to both. Trust me, you’ll want the Taylor’s.” It was also farther away.

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

“I recall, once upon a time, Belle, that you were very fond of Mr. Taylor’s trim mustache and dark sideburns.” Indeed, half the girls at school had been swept away by his handsomeness.

“A childish era of my life, I am sure. Of one thing I am certain, when I am engaged, I do not intend to lose him.”

Such a cruel comment. Clara controlled her voice. “That is the general idea.” Engagements were almost legal, nearly binding. Unless the woman objected... In her own moment of weakness, she’d released Christian. Freed him from forever being bound to her darkness.

Belle must have leaned forward, because now her hand touched Clara’s arm as if in secret. She recoiled from her touch. “Do you think Lucy will do it? Consent to marry Christian? ”

“I really can’t say.” Clara crossed her ankles. If only Belle would leave. She’d done her duty. The interrogation had gone on long enough.

“Well, Clara, you are like a heroine in a tragic drama.”

Clara trembled and hoped Belle didn't see. Heroine? She was anything but.

“I saw your cane the night of the ball. When I'm old I want one just like it. The silver work is glorious.”

Another killing compliment. “You can have mine now, if you wish it so dearly.”

Belle ignored her. “What cunning slippers you have! Reminds me of Daniel Boone.”

Clara felt the heat rise to her face. She'd forgotten she was wearing her rabbit skin scuffs. She stood, “Thank you for calling, Belle. If I don't see you again soon, I'll understand that you are busy with beaus.” With an effort, she forced herself to stand and perform a parting curtsy.

“Good afternoon, Clara.”

Clara listened to Belle's gown rustle through the door. The finest fabric matched the finest features. Belle's physical perfection always won the silly society games. Won the affections of any and every available young man. The other girls were second choices. Or third.

Where did that leave her? Played a fool and no one would ever forget.

Clara felt for her cane. She hated it. Belle wanted one when she was old, did she? Clara whacked it on the stone hearth. It did not break. She whacked it again and again until Jenny ran in. She tried to take it from her hands, but Clara threw it into the fire.

Fury burst forth. “If you pull that cane out, I'll have you whipped!”

Jenny released her. “Oh, chile. ”

Clara leaned against the warm side of the hearth, miserable and tired. More alone than ever.

Mrs. Ramshaw’s cold voice penetrated. “When I was a child, I spake as a child, understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. You shall have to get along without your cane now. What a terrible decision you have made.” Her words remained strong.

“Now I’ll have to scrape charred silver out of my grate.

If you weren’t blind, I’d make you clean it up yourself, Clara. ”

“Do you never have moments of anger, Mrs. Ramshaw? Am I not allowed to have feelings?” She pressed a hand against the thorn in her heart, drawing blood down her soul.

“Your folly has proved you have that freedom.”

She tossed her head back. “Perhaps you did not know that Belle McPherson was here.” Couldn’t she understand how fresh her loss was?

“And she told you to beat your cane upon my hearth and burn it then threaten my friend with whipping?” Mrs. Ramshaw’s voice shook.

Guilt surged. Clara had never intended to harm Jenny. Was an empty threat, that’s all.

Mrs. Ramshaw continued. “I know she’s flighty, but I can’t imagine a well-mannered girl suggesting—or doing—such a thing.”

Clara opened her hands in the air, empty of excuses or explanations. She had no answers, didn't Mrs. Ramshaw already understand? She felt her way to the stairs, brushing past her.

Mrs. Ramshaw's voice followed her. "Of course, none of us here knows what it's like to be blind. Still it's quite plain in Scripture: 'Be angry, yet do not sin.'"

"Have I sinned?"

"You can ask yourself that. "

Noiselessly, Clara closed her bedroom door. The quiet day had turned into a roiling headache.

HOURS LATER, CLARA crept downstairs. Supper was being laid on the table. Mrs. Ramshaw read patiently with Morrie.

Clara cleared her voice. "I don't think I've ever been so angry, nor acted in such a rash way as this afternoon. I beg your forgiveness." The old woman remained silent. "You probably think I've gone crazy. You must know that my heart is still broken."

She faltered. Easy tears dripped down her chin. "I feel I must be honest with you. Perhaps you don't know, Mrs. Ramshaw, but my sister Lucy is set to court and marry Christian. I accidentally discovered this the night of the ball. I don't know how to endure the shame."

Mrs. Ramshaw sat her down at the supper table in the kitchen. "Aren't you merely repeating gossip? Things get mighty twisted when they are spread around."

"Lucy confessed it before we left the MacPherson's. Jenny knows it to be true as well."

“Wretched. Well. If he would have your sister so soon after rejecting you, he is a rogue. He would have done you ill, mark my words. And I fear he’ll do your sister ill. We’ll write Lucy a letter and warn her.”

“You speak truth. I have already warned her.”

“Surely your heart should be on the mend with such information?”

“It’s not so much about Christian anymore, but the fact that my love was dispensable. Disposable. I am unloved with little chance of recovery.”

Clara heard a stifled cry at the end of the room. Morrie, who was usually as quiet as a mouse, wretched into a nearby bucket.

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Ramshaw said .

Jenny dished chicken and dumpling on the plate before Clara. “You ain’t the only one, chile.”

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Clara dreamt of her horse again. She woke with a smile. The warm velvet, the air, the sun, the wide green fields, the soaring speed. The power that knew exactly what to do with her spirit.

Being pent up in Mrs. Ramshaw's abode—day after day—wore upon her tender soul. A mere walk wasn't sufficient.

Reverend Merrick's readings had fallen by the wayside after two Sunday afternoons.

So much for his devotion. The man was as busy as the doctor.

The entire congregation suffered from one thing or another and each person thought the man could cure them with a simple prayer. Poor souls, didn't they know better?

Some prayers never got answered. Assuming they were heard at all.

Jenny's granddaughter was pregnant. Poor thing. Clara heard whimpering through the walls at night. Perhaps some bloke had wronged her, but how the girl could pine for the scoundrel!

As for her, she was done with Christian and anyone connected to him, be it her family or foe. Hard to tell the difference at times.

That morning, Clara put on the blue gown and added two extra curls the night before so that two trailed down to her shoulders and joined the flowing cascade in the back. Something had to happen today, or she would go out of her mind.

Evidently, Reverend Merrick had sent a message that he was coming today. Mrs. Ramshaw and Jenny had been about dinner preparations for their guest since morning .

Her heart thudded slightly. Reverend Merrick owned a horse, didn't he? Perhaps he would indulge her in a ride...or perhaps escort her home to visit the stables.

Father might have forbidden her to go near a horse again, but he wasn't here to enforce his law upon her.

Besides, it wasn't the horse's fault she fell and then caught a fever.

The more she thought, the more she felt that Christian was at fault.

He had played a dangerous game by bounding in front of her.

How had she not understood that before now?

She shouldn't blame herself. If he'd been struck blind, she would not have abandoned him. Certainly not.

A few hours later, Mrs. Ramshaw had done an impossible thing. She seemed to always be redefining what was appropriate. For example, Jenny and Morrie were commanded to dine with them. In the dining room. Mrs. Ramshaw would have the pleasure of serving.

Morrie nearly cried because the preacher would see her delicate condition.

"Nonsense. It isn't a condition. God's weaving a baby in there. It is sacred. If Reverend Merrick is the right kind of preacher, he will see your little one my way."

Clara listened to Jenny's mumblings. "Ain't gonna be took well by the master, dining at the big table. You tell him you tol' us to do it."

Mrs. Ramshaw didn't hesitate. "Jenny, in my eyes, you are a free woman."

"In yo eyes only. I's bought and paid for, Mrs. Ramshaw."

"Only by the blood of Jesus. We all are. Now I hear the Reverend at the door."

Clara reached out. "Jenny?"

"Yes, Miss Clara. I go to the kitchen if you tell me."

"No, I want you and Morrie to do what she says." While the orders confused Clara, the plan seemed good. Peaceful, somehow. As if they were her family now. How good it would feel to have them near her around the table.

"Clara!" Reverend Merrick's presence filled her senses. "I've neglected our readings. Shame on me. I'm not sure anything will come of David Copperfield if I don't follow through."

Clara laughed and gave her finest smile. An outing was at stake. "You haven't been reading ahead, have you?"

"You've caught me. Without thinking, I read a chapter. I swear to you only one."

Mrs. Ramshaw cleared her throat. "That will be enough swearing, let us eat."

Jenny and Morrie didn't speak the entire luncheon except for a 'yes ma'am' or 'no ma'am' when Mrs. Ramshaw tried to get them to converse. Though Clara did not see them she knew in her heart they weren't happy.

Mrs. Ramshaw had asked Reverend Merrick an interpretation of Scripture based on his sermons. Clara suspected she was underhandedly trying to evangelize Jenny and Morrie. How sneaky that old woman could be. But Reverend Merrick used rather educated words even she had trouble understanding.

It was during one of his long explanations that Clara couldn't help thinking of his looks again. She was glad she'd troubled herself about her appearance this morning. She meant to flatter her way into the horse stable.

All she knew was his voice and the length of his hand when he had placed hers under his when he poured tea. He was a gentleman and a minister, nothing more. Might even be engaged. Rotten thought if she hoped to—

His voice penetrated her thoughts. “You really ought to be doing something with those hands of yours, Miss Stanton.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My mother could knit blindfolded. ”

As if every woman ought to know how to knit! “How very fortunate for your family.”

“Tell me, how have you been keeping yourself busy?”

The question Clara dreaded and the one everyone asked. She'd been busy moping, daydreaming, tracing her finger along the decorative edge of the teacart in the parlor. Eating.

He caught her. “You are quite right, I need to be doing something. I had hopes of engaging you for a ride about town, if I may?”

“If I had a carriage, I would gladly oblige. Sad state you find me in.”

“I don’t need a carriage, I know how to ride, if you would but lead the horse. Please, I am itching to get out.”

“Clara, it is not appropriate to beg.”

“She’s not begging, only politely inquiring. I know how she must feel. I spent an entire winter sick and cooped up in my bedchamber when I was a child. Would have been dreadful except for my books.”

“Dat chile needs to stay off a horse. The master done threatened us if we ever helped her do it. She be forbidden.”

“Jenny! Father’s not even here!”

Reverend Merrick wasted no time. “I am so sorry, Miss Stanton. You’ve been commanded not to ride, I can’t go against your father’s wishes like that.”

Clara leaned her head upon her hand.

“If it makes you feel better, Lass and I hardly get along. The horse definitely has something against me. If I don’t fall on my backside once a week...” he laughed.

Clara dropped her hand and accidentally knocked her plate off the table. No sound of breaking china. She could be grateful for that.

DANIEL WATCHED CLARA’S hopeful countenance fall like a raincloud. How often had she ridden before her accident ?

He himself had never even owned a dog. New York City was too busy, too much

traffic for pets. The city officials had enough problems with horse droppings filling the street.

Truth be told, he couldn't wait to own a horse and find some freedom in the wide-open countryside. Archibald Methodist Episcopal had made it happen. Little did they know of his inner glee.

Perhaps she might enjoy at least petting Lass. The horse probably wanted some attention after downing that bag of oats and standing alone.

"Come outside with me and give her a pat anyway."

"I'm sure we can spare an apple for the creature," Mrs. Ramshaw said.

"I suppose it will have to do." Clara wiped her lips with the tip of her napkin and stood.

The girl regained her formal self. All composed and pliant enough only to obey the rules of civility. Had she been allowed to ride, he wondered what kind of expression might grace her sweet face.

He caught himself. He couldn't be thinking of faces as sweet. Especially hers. She was too vulnerable. And God help him if he got snagged by another escapade.

"I bought the horse from your father, perhaps he isn't a stranger. I mean she. Lass is a Morgan."

"Father is fond of Morgans. He's always got a colt to sell."

"Lass is a better horseman than I am, believe it or not. Where is your cane? I'll retrieve it for you."

“I...”

“It’s missing.” Mrs. Ramshaw presented him with an apple.

“Oh, shame. Hopefully it will turn up.”

Clara rose from her chair. “I’m afraid it’s gone for good.”

He stepped to her side. “May I guide you?”

“Please. ”

He placed her hand in the crook of his arm. Her nearness warmed him. He hadn’t expected that. This was a girl he pitied, though she had declared she didn’t want such concern. Unavoidable.

He panicked as they walked down the steps. A thought struck him. Could Mr. Stanton possibly have sold him Clara’s horse? Oh no .

“Wouldn’t you like me to read first? We can go in by the fire and stay warm that way.”

“No, not yet.”

Maybe there wasn’t a single horse to her name, and she rode whatever was available on her farm. She was blind. How could she tell one horse from another? He hoped his hunch was wrong.

“Here she is.” He brought her hand to the side of Lass’s face, watching Clara slowly stroke its wide jaw and run her hand down the long neck.

Lass nodded her head and stamped her foot. Clara turned to him. "She wants the apple. Let me give it to her." She reached out.

"Are you sure it's safe? Won't she bite your fingers off?"

Amusement crested her sightless eyes. "Haven't you given her apples before?"

"I confess I have not."

"Maybe that's why she doesn't like you. Let me show you how it's done."

Indeed, his lack of horsemanship was dreadfully obvious. Even the blind girl could see that.

She held the apple in the palm of her hand. Lass took it in an instant, smacking sweet juices between her large lips and teeth.

Clara stroked the horse's side now. "How many hands is she?"

"Haven't a clue."

She reached up behind Lass's neck, ran her hand under the still chomping jaw. She didn't stop stroking the creature. When her hand reached up the back of the mane, she stopped .

"I thought Esther was dead." She leaned her head against the horse's neck, holding the beast with both hands. "They led me to believe..." Tears filled her eyes.

"Oh no." So, the horse he'd purchased had been hers. He felt like a fool. Didn't know what to say.

Mrs. Ramshaw must've seen from the window. She came rushing outside. "Is she ill? What is it?"

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“Mr. Stanton sold me this horse. Apparently, she belonged to Clara.”

“The one that caused the accident? Oh mercy.”

The old woman looked as much at a loss as he felt.

Clara raised her head again and petted with long, soft strokes. “Please let me ride her.”

This time she was begging. “Even if your father hadn’t forbidden it, the saddle is not fit for you.” Despite his firm response, Daniel was tempted to give in. He wanted to see her happiness bloom, and from there, find the door to her soul...

A second later she flung her arms to the saddle horn and pulled herself up with an agility he’d never before seen in a woman, and took hold of the reins.

“Clara! Your ankles are showing!” Mrs. Ramshaw pulled at Clara’s foot. She shook it away. “Get down from there at once!”

Somehow, the girl had loosened the lead. She kicked Esther’s side and the horse automatically made for the road. She kicked again and picked up the pace.

Daniel ran after her. “Clara! Don’t do this!” It was his turn to plead.

She kicked again and Esther broke into a full run. As they rounded the bend, Daniel saw her face. Fully alive and yet completely terrified. And by golly, if it didn’t appear that she enjoyed it too.

“Mrs. Ramshaw! ”

The good lady had already pulled her own dapple gray from the stable. “Retrieve her, Reverend, before she is killed!”

“Your horse has no saddle!”

Her mouth drew a firm line. “Go without or I’ll have to do it. Quick, man!”

Heaven help him. He stepped on a mounting stone, and with a pounding heart, put himself on the saddle-less beast. “What do I hold?” The horse had nothing but a lead around his face.

“Hold the sides with your legs—gee haw!” Mrs. Ramshaw slapped its hind.

Daniel shouted. “Mrs. Ram—” The dapple-gray flicked its head from side to side and pushed ahead at a trot, down the road Clara had taken.

He bounced helplessly. And quite without a hat.

Not that God required hats while rescuing obstinate damsels in distress.

He squeezed his arms around the horse’s neck as well as he could while still looking ahead, kicking like he’d seen Clara do.

It worked, only the darn horse made a turn into town instead of where he needed to go.

Good thing it connected with the other road. At a good trot, they turned in the right direction. Miss Stanton was a good quarter mile ahead. “Miss Stanton! Stop! I’m coming for you!” Surely, she had come to her senses by now.

To his surprise, she slowed and seemed to wait, Esther stamped backward and turned in a tight circle. Mrs. Ramshaw's horse slowed to a doable trot, though his teeth chattered within his head. Did she play a game? Would she dart away as soon as he caught up?

He grumbled. Such doings could be seen from windows and gossiped about.

If anyone found out he'd spent a few minutes alone in the presence of this girl, they'd be forced into marriage within a fortnight.

A sacrifice he certainly wouldn't put up with.

Not again. His reputation—what was left of it—couldn't survive another strained letter of recommendation.

To where this time? Some misbegotten settlement far from this small but decent town?

He'd already fallen in the eyes of those who'd once esteemed him.

Posh. Chasing blind girls would be added to his list. Women were costly in more ways than one.

A few moments later, he sidled up to Clara. He expected to see a triumphant look on her face. Would she bolt? "Rather bold of you, Miss Stanton."

Deathly white, she turned at his arrival. Her ungloved hands quivered, even as they gripped the reins. Her long, dark bonnet-free hair blew about her in the breeze.

No, she wasn't going to bolt, but might certainly faint if he didn't get her down.

He slid off the dapple gray with a thud and reached for the reins. “Let go. I’ve got them.” Her trembling increased, but she held fast. He hadn’t expected that.

“Come, now.” He felt like he was dealing with a child.

His youngest brother at five. Still, she would not release them.

“I’ll not be the one to report to your father, I assure you.

” He gently took one of her hands and stroked it.

And then lifted one finger at a time until her hands relaxed and he had Esther’s reins firmly in his grasp.

“Are you unwell?”

She shook her head. Her complexion remained pale, gaining a pinched scowl. She slid off her horse without help. Certainly she’d done the same a thousand times before.

“When your father returns, I’ll see if I can change this horse for another.” He stopped talking. Probably wasn’t the time to discuss it.

She only nodded.

“Fine. I’ll lead the horses on the right and guide you home on my left.

” He rested her small hand again in the crook of his arm.

Lord, if you would, if there be spying eyes, make sure they don’t become babbling mouths .

Please. Oh the gossip that could boil up if—he gritted his teeth.

He'd been a gentleman, and no more than that. Since when was he prone to worry?

They made their way down the dusty road. Miss Stanton's expression didn't improve. Perhaps her brain had been addled by the ride. Poor girl.

After some time, she began to limp. She made no mention of it. Why wouldn't she speak up? Embarrassed. That's what she was.

For several minutes, Daniel stared ahead. Aware of only the monotonous sound of plodding hooves and feet.

When she spoke, her voice was small and rusty. "Everyone else knows what is best for me. I have no say. Not a single request or decision has been honored by anyone since my fall. I'm treated as if my reasoning capabilities are no longer functional, therefore, no longer trusted."

He had to speak up. "Was it wise for you to throw yourself on that horse?"

"No. You know very well it wasn't. The point is, I shouldn't have had to do it. I should have been free to enjoy a ride. I'm willing to accept help."

Her hand continued to tremble.

"I'm like a caged animal. Visited by curious town folk when they are bored and out of good stories to spread on their toast at tea time."

"I'm afraid exhibitions like that will give them plenty to talk about."

"Exhibition? I've always been told I had perfect posture on the back of my horse. I

think it was you and Mrs. Ramshaw who made a scene by acting as if I'd launched a tiger instead of a horse."

The girl was blinder than he thought. "We feared for your safety."

He kept pace, even while she limped. He waited for her to say something, turned onto a shortcut down Morgan Row.

The town houses reminded him of differing parts of old New York.

One section had risen to heights, the other grew at a slow but gentle pace.

Though not at all like home, he enjoyed life here.

Had more time to think and ponder. The rolling hills, the endless sky.

..He wished he could take her riding. How lovely that would be.

A party of friends on the backs of horses—come spring. If permission could possibly be had.

"Did you enjoy your ride, Miss Stanton?"

"No."

"What a waste. Why not?"

She spoke through closed teeth. "I could not see where I was going." He could almost hear her thinking, You fool.

Still, she limped. He would not make her suffer any longer. "You hurt your ankle."

She nodded. “In the stirrup...”

“Let’s get you back on Lass—Esther. I’ll lead you home.

” As Daniel assisted her mount, he couldn’t help but think of what she had said.

No one trusted her to make decisions...like a caged animal she was.

..Sweet Jesus, the girl had been frightened out of her mind.

What torments she must suffer feeling her way in the darkness.

Through his few years of service in the great church of Archibald Methodist Episcopal, he had never seen anyone so wounded.

A few hundred had been in his acquaintance. Many sick and dying had rested in Heaven’s assurance. Others had dutifully come to church, lent their ears to exhortation and went their own way.

Her wounds came from the depths of her soul oozing for anyone to see, if they wished to look. He looked. Hurt his eyes to see it. What, Lord, am I to do with this ?

“Reverend Merrick? I am mortified.” Her voice broke. She covered her face with a handkerchief.

“I’m sorry, Miss Stanton. I would take your suffering from you if I could.” But what could he really do for but care and pray? Until she gave her wounds to the One wounded for her, nothing. It wasn’t in his power.

REVEREND MERRICK’S gentle words broke her heart.

He would remove her suffering? Didn't he believe that this punishment would do her good?

Illuminate her need for God? Clara withstood Mrs. Ramshaw's storm on their return.

She'd been given more than one ultimatum.

And in front of the Reverend. He had not been able to take his leave as Clara was still astride.

Her humiliation felt so complete, she had no reply.

No cake or sweets was a child's punishment. She was no child. Ridiculous.

To her surprise, Reverend Merrick came to her defense. "Give the woman the benefit of the doubt, Ramshaw."

"There's nothing to doubt, Reverend. She obviously can't follow rules."

"What are you going to do about it, spank her? I think she's too old for that."

Clara felt heat rise up her neck to her face.

"I won't do it again, Mrs. Ramshaw, Reverend Merrick.

I apologize for putting you through unmerited stress.

" She forced the words from her mouth. Someday.

Someday soon, she'd get on a horse and simply ride away.

If only she were brave enough to do it now.

Where would she go? She brought a hand to Esther's neck still stunned that her horse yet lived.

It wasn't your fault. It was...Christian rounded his horse around hers far too close to the fence. Then pitch darkness...

Was Reverend Merrick laughing? "If it wasn't for you, I'd never have ridden bareback. You've brought adventure to my day to say the least."

Clara heard snickering from the doorway. Jenny and Morrie had witnessed her stupidity too. Wait...they weren't talking about her.

"I nevah seen a man as scared as you, Reverend. You hangin' onta that pony like he was gonna ride you to the moon." Jenny laughed. "I ain't nevah gonna foget dat sight."
"

Mrs. Ramshaw cleared her throat. "I should have gone after her myself."

"You huggin' dat pony's neck like a chile!"

His laughter mingled with hers, and even a giggle escaped Mrs. Ramshaw's lips. "You need riding lessons, Reverend." Desperately.

Clara felt his hands on hers to help her down. When she landed, his arms came beneath her.

"She's sprained her ankle." He swept her inside and set her upon the couch. She couldn't help it. A grin tugged at her lips. "Is it true? You were scared? You don't know how to ride?"

“I get around.” Defensiveness laced his voice.

For the first time in months, she allowed laughter to bubble out.

She turned her face toward his voice. “Take care of Esther. Please.”

He promised he would.

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Daniel smiled to himself. Clara would have him to thank, though she should never know. Ministerial visits could be fruitful indeed.

Mrs. Winters poured another cup of tea. "I'll send around the invitation for next week. You are correct, Reverend, one should not stay so cooped up when her friends are at hand."

Her daughter, Miss Mary Winters, sat by the fireplace stitching. "We mustn't ask Belle. She's a perfect demon." She didn't even look up.

"Mary! Hold your tongue and pray God doesn't strike you down for slander."

"It's true, mother. She courts three men at once. It isn't fair."

"Reverend Merrick doesn't care about courting conversations, do you?"

Daniel nodded, "Only with regard to myself."

Mary burst into laughter. "Fair enough, mother. Even ministers want to be in the game."

"How came you to be so coy? Finish those stitches and hold your tongue."

Daniel held a laugh. If anyone might cheer Clara, Mary Winters seemed fit for the job.

"You'll come for tea when we have finished shopping, Reverend? I think it would be,

um...good for the young ladies that you are present. ”

“Ah...I’d be delighted.” As usual, he hadn’t thought quick enough to avoid this annoyance.

If only Francine was here, she might take his place at these petty social functions.

Really, why was it good for a reverend to preside over a gaggle of ladies?

To be married off, of course. Just maybe he would be called away before he had to endure that.

He retrieved his hat and gloves and took his leave. Moments later, in the privacy of his study, he read a letter from his sister.

“ I am coming, I can bear Mr. Johnson no longer. Or that awful Mr. Crawley. Harper and Elias like Mr. Johnson, he brings them presents of sling shots and peppermints. He brings me a sheaf of badly written notes and asks me to rewrite them. After I’ve taught a class of thirty-two.

Mother seems to think it daughterly of me to help him since he cannot see so well, I say to her that I am not his daughter and would not cramp my hands for the notes his assistant is already paid to adjust. Mother doesn’t respond and goes right on darning the family socks. And I am exhausted.

There has to be more to life, Daniel. I have prayed about this, I have apologized to Mother and Mr. Johnson and declared my purpose in coming to you...”

What was her purpose, exactly? Daniel turned the letter over.

“I’ll be there on Monday, the last week of November.”

Daniel tapped his fingers on his desk. He was happy that she was coming, but her troubles did not seem so dire as to make the long journey. Still, her presence would make a great difference to his work, if she was willing. Like go to that wretched tea. Too bad she wasn't already here.

CLARA JOSTLED BETWEEN Mary Winters and the cold, hard side of the carriage. Mrs. Ramshaw had essentially forced her to accept the invitation. "You've been too idle," she'd muttered .

Two hours of shopping with a group of young ladies of her age did lift her spirits.

The rogue horse ride she'd taken had left her uncertain of her standing with Mrs. Ramshaw.

Did the lady think she'd lost her mind? Did everyone?

The question ate at her. And it kept her still, neither demanding nor doing anything.

What Mrs. Ramshaw called idle, Clara called safe.

They disembarked for another shop—would they have walked instead.

Reverend Merrick had whispered in her ear that day, that she must be a passionate woman to throw herself on the back of a horse.

She knew he didn't mean to be vulgar. He understood, perhaps, her desire to be one with the wind.

To feel the freedom of an open field, racing towards a happy future, all green and golden before her.

Mary's laugh brought her back to reality. She'd been standing at the counter, stroking a ribbon without thinking. "What color is this?"

"A very dull green. Might do for that old lady that keeps you, though. Here, your bonnet wants this wide blue ribbon."

Clara purchased the blue ribbon, a few half-pounds of chocolate, peppermint sticks, and tea. At the last moment, she chose some pencils and paper for Morrie. Thankfully, no one questioned this purchase, though they full well knew the items could not be for her.

It had been salt rubbed in the wound to listen to Morrie learning to read. Perhaps the gift of pencil and paper would put her in good graces with Mrs. Ramshaw.

Reverend Merrick didn't come to read aloud often enough. She craved stories, happy endings. For her own life. And for her horse. If only, if only, if only...

Clara reached for Mary. She wasn't there. Distant laughter rippled outside. Clara adjusted her basketful on her arm. "Clerk? Clerk?" She turned in a circle, her arms out. She would not panic.

"My friends, where are they? "

"Just outside the door."

"And the door?"

"Oh, you're the girl that was struck blind. Tragic, one so young as you. Here, I'll take you to them." Clara felt the man's hand on the back of her elbow, guiding her. "Mind your step. Two down, there's a lass."

Mary saw her. “Oh, do forgive me, Clara. Yvette saw the dearest bonnet in the window and we couldn’t get a good look unless we came outside. It’s rather cold, and I believe we will be just in time for tea if we leave now.”

“I am chilled to the bone. We must be stir-crazy to want to go shopping in this cold,” Yvette said.

Clara laughed. What could she say? Stir crazy? They didn’t know the meaning. “I’m certainly ready for tea.”

“I hope we haven’t tired you out too much?” Mary asked.

Was she that fragile? “Not at all.” Clara climbed into the coach, the chill air seeped up her sleeves and into her cloak.

Her friends quietly whispered and laughed softly. Clara kept a practiced smile in place. Did they really believe she didn’t know the topic of discussion?

Moments later, they circled around the parlor hearth. Talk of handsome young men dominated the conversation until Mary called out to Clara. “Have you had any gentleman callers lately?”

“I believe you have heard of my broken engagement, but I’d rather not speak of it.”

“You do well to forget him. Perhaps you will have a better offer.” Mary giggled.

Clara found none of it humorous. “Who would make such an offer to me?”

“Poor Clara. We all feel for you, you know.”

“How kind of you.” How she wished she could see their expressions .

“It hasn’t changed your beauty in the least,” Mary said.

“That’s a relief.”

“I heard that the preacher, Reverend Merrick has been roped into reading long sermons to you. Must be dreadful.” Mary laughed, the others joined in.

Clara smirked. “Of course it is dreadful, you can only imagine what it is like!” And Clara laughed too, deeply embarrassed by the thought that her life had stooped so that she had to endure the pity of the local clergyman.

But Reverend Merrick, he wasn’t like what they described.

Had they not heard his sermons? What did they think of his looks?

“Mother has tea ready, girls. Come to the table.”

DANIEL REFUSED TO STAY . Urgent business, he’d told Mrs. Winters. How could Clara be as coy as the others? He stood ready to open the door when he overheard them talking.

Dreadful, was he? He wouldn’t waste his time in that quarter. And she would certainly have all his sermons offered up, the hellfire, damnation ones to be sure. From the pulpit. Such ingratitude.

He hastened down the street, flung open the front door of his home then slammed it.

He leaned against its cold back. Truly her foolish words didn’t matter to him. Perhaps she hadn’t meant what she said. But how could she not when announcing his dreadfulness to the entire room? Or was she referencing his pronunciation rather than his presence?

He would certainly not stay to tea. He hadn't wanted to be there in the first place. Putting himself in the center of half a dozen flirting girls could be detrimental to his career. Maybe he should thank God for getting him out of an embarrassing situation. Or had He?

"THERE'S ONE THING THAT bothers me, girls, perhaps you can help."

"Anything, Clara. We are here to be your slaves for the afternoon." Mary laughed.

"I know what all of you look like, for that I am grateful. But for the life of me, I can't picture the new minister. I've imagined him with bulging eyes and a giant hooked nose, but I know that cannot be generous of me. I plead with you, tell me of his looks."

"His eyes do bulge a little," Mary said. "Yes, quite a little, especially when he preaches. Or when he's around Miss Gray."

"His eyes do not bulge in the least," Yvette said. "They are brown. His hair is black as a raven's wing and he's tall."

"Would you call him handsome, then?" Oh dear. Had she asked that?

"I'm sure if he had more money, he would be," Mary said.

"Charlie Pearson has both and he's fair game. So long as Belle doesn't meddle."

"I'm not up for the game," Yvette said. "I want a sensible, devoted man. I don't care if he's rich."

"Oh, you'll care, you just don't know it yet. One does have to live one's entire life with a man. Might as well be nice to look at and rich enough to keep you happy!"

Clara forced a laugh. She wrapped her arms together and felt terribly far from home. Strange that her place—her life—was now with Mrs. Ramshaw. Not her family.

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Daniel took off his coat and hung it on a hook. He tossed his hat to the table and unbuttoned his vest. No doubt his nose was red as it burned from the biting cold. The blustery day was a sign from God for people to stay indoors, lest they be swept away as the lingering leaves.

“Mrs. Kilgore? What have you in store for me?”

“Reverend, you’re back. Is Old Ruby Anders still on this earth?”

“She lingers, it won’t be long.”

“Well. Your stew is in the pot—the tea is brewed. The cat caught two mice while you were out.”

“Thank you. Perhaps I should keep a tally of his victims.”

“If y’ wish to do so.” She looked at him as though his mind had snapped. “I must be off, Mr. Kilgore is waitin’ for his dinner. You’d think the man might learn to boil water by now.”

She exited the back door with a whoosh of wind. Daniel put a spoon into the pot and lifted hot beans to his lips. Mercy, they were chewy.

His stomach growled.

He poured a cup of tea and tried it. Lukewarm and bitter. He’d been expected sooner. But how did that explain the beans? The bread and butter on the sideboard did not

look appetizing either. Odd.

“I must be thankful, but I’m too overdone and miserable. Is it too late to ask for manna? A few thousand years too late.”

Cat mewed .

“At least you had a decent meal today.”

Had he even eaten lunch? As soon as he made rounds at the clinic, he’d been called to Old Ruby’s bedside, a few miles out of town. Esther had not cooperated, and he’d been forced to walk again, pulling her behind him like a balking mule.

As soon as Mr. Stanton returned from England, perhaps the man would have mercy on him and let him trade Esther in for a horse that actually liked him. Return this one to its rightful owner.

He’d stayed for a few hours at Old Ruby’s bedside praying, comforting, and finally breaking up a brawl between two old brothers who ought to know better. Forgiveness could be hard to come by.

He still had trouble forgiving Miss Stanton for her ungracious words.

Dreadful indeed. How very unlike her. In all probability, it was a jolly party and she was swept into the moment by the others.

But still...it stung. As a result, he’d declined the last two invitations to Mrs. Ramshaw’s, and tossed the novel aside.

He’d lost interest. Was his offense her punishment?

Did she care about the story and was too embarrassed to say so?

He tore a crust of bread and chewed. People either flung themselves at him or avoided him altogether, as if he carried a ridiculous plague. Mrs. Ramshaw was the most normal friend he had at the moment. And that was saying something.

He laughed at the thought. Who said a young preacher and an old lady couldn't be friends? Good friends shared food. His spirits lifted. What simmered in the Ramshaw pot tonight? Time to find out.

Mrs. Ramshaw always asked him to stay for supper. He would observe Miss Stanton and see if she seemed outrageously bored by his presence. Then he'd know for certain...and forgive accordingly. Strike that. He needed to forgive her right now.

Did one need an excuse for showing up ?

"No, I'll be honest and say that I am hungry. Nothing wrong with being humble once in a while, Cat. Does a man good."

CLARA HELD THEM, UNCERTAIN . Two letters from England had arrived an hour prior. Mrs. Ramshaw had not been home when they'd come. Jenny handed them to her and had returned to the kitchen.

Clara basked by the parlor fire, humming a tune. She might simply toss the letters in and let the flames have them. What did it matter? Her mother's letter, she could guess at without knowing the content. Lucy's letter was thick. She had news to tell. Oh, but did she want to hear it?

Could she bear to hate Christian more? Love Lucy less?

She hummed another tune, her thoughts swallowing what little peace she'd found.

She had already decided that Mrs. Ramshaw must not see the letters. What if Mother wrote distasteful instructions? If so, she wanted the option not to follow through. Blissful ignorance.

Morrie could not yet read well enough, nor did she want gossip to circle among the slaves and into other houses, to the families she'd once called friends.

Mary Winters would read them with great interest, no doubt, and have a good laugh at her expense. Not to mention share every detail.

Clara feigned that she'd had a good time, and for a portion of her outing, she had.

The next Sunday, she had been standing where she wasn't expected, and overheard them.

Her pretend friends. Turned out, they had tested her blindness by dangling all manner of items in front of her face during the tea.

A necklace. A bit of lace. A glove...Cruel cattiness .

Like a Stanton girl would, she'd flicked them off like unwanted bugs. She would not accept another invitation from anyone. If only Annie still lived close. Had anyone bothered to write to her?

It had been a year since her last letter, at least. She'd married when at seventeen and moved to Missouri. Perhaps she had a child by now...

Clara resumed humming, recalling dancing lessons with Annie by her side. They had laughed and fallen in an unladylike heap on the floor, taken long rides, and attempted French studies with far less enthusiasm. Such carefree days long over.

Mrs. Ramshaw came rushing through the hall. “Prepare an extra place, if you will, Jenny. Reverend Merrick has come to my rescue. Why I decided to run to the grocer’s at this hour is beyond me. Nearly smashed the eggs and the Reverend here almost stepped on the bread I didn’t know had fallen.”

Clara tucked the letters beneath the bench pillows, heat rushed to her face. She must look a fright. Never matter.

She smiled and held out her hand like she’d been trained to do. “Reverend Merrick, we haven’t had the pleasure for three weeks, at least.”

His hand clasped hers. “Many of my parishioners are unwell.”

Clara snorted. “They all believe they are dying, no doubt.”

“Well they are dying, Miss Stanton.”

She nodded. “I am sorry to hear it. You must be weary. How is Esther?”

“Ornery. How did you ever manage to ride her? I don’t think she likes me.”

“I was the only one who rode her, Reverend. Perhaps she is not used to your weight—I beg your pardon, I do not mean to insinuate that you are heavy, I mean...”
Drat.

The picture she’d carried of him in her head grew from the bulging eyes and hooked nose to a large paunch.

But she knew that wasn’t true. Hadn’t Yvette said he was tall?

“You are right, perhaps my height is a problem, though I’m not sure I want a larger

horse.”

Clara nodded and they were quiet. The reverend sounded especially stiff. She sat on the bench and heard the creak of the rocking chair not far from her.

“I should have thought to bring David Copperfield...or is my reading to you overly boring? I do not want to waste your time, Clara.”

“Not at all, I appreciate it very much. If I have scowled in the least, it is because I prefer to read things for myself. I apologize if I have not seemed grateful.”

“My sister arrives in a few days.”

An abrupt subject change. “Does she?”

“I hope you will find a good companion in her.”

Clara knew she had to ask him to read the letters for her. Weren’t ministers bound to keep secrets? “I have a favor to ask...”

“I can’t take you riding. Though I wish I could.”

The heat came back to her face. “I wouldn’t dare ask that again. I know what I ought to be, I will strive not to dissappoint.”

“And what is it that you ought to be? How do you get there from here?”

“Compliance. My lot in life.”

“Compliance, Clara? Doesn’t suit you.”

She heard a dry chuckle. “What would you have then?”

“God calls us to obedience. Sometimes one has to break from compliance in order to fulfill His call.”

She didn’t understand. She had resolved to do what was asked of her until such a time she might find her own freedom. Until then, was that not the same as obedience?

“Forgive me the sermon, you had a favor to ask? ”

Clara lowered her voice to a whisper. “Mrs. Ramshaw mustn’t know. I’m not asking for you to do anything wrong, I merely wish privacy. I received letters from my family today...”

“I see. You want me to read them to you?”

“I couldn’t think of anyone else whom I could trust to keep them private. You are a man of God and bound to it, I think?”

“I’d be honored to read them to you.”

“Bring Clara in, Reverend, and eat the dumplings before the gravy grows cold.”

“It is fourteen paces to the dining room, see, I can manage without help.” She stood.

“My mother would pull my ear if I did not give a young woman a proper escort.” He reached for her hand and loosely placed it on his arm. He leaned over and whispered. “I’ll read them to you after supper.”

Clara felt his warmth through the sleeve of his jacket and faltered as he gently led her to the dining chair. So different from Christian’s possessive grip, her attraction to him

a diversion from the man he really was.

THERE. NOTHING IN HER demeanor suggested that he was boring to Clara. Trusted him enough to read her personal letters. She had playacted before her friends, that was all. Girls could be so silly.

As relieved as he felt, the weariness from the day fed his exhaustion. The chicken and dumplings and green beans had soothed his empty stomach. The fresh pot of tea would do him in.

“Jenny and I will see to the dishes. Morrie, will you put bricks into our beds? And the Reverend will be put to work by reading to our Clara. ”

“How did you know I planned to do just that, Mrs. Ramshaw?” He winked at Clara and realized she didn’t see that. Good thing, he hadn’t meant to do it.

“My father told me that I had brilliant intuition.” Her chin rose high and her eyes sparkled with intent. “Rather like Morrie, if you ask me.” Morrie lowered her head and scurried off to do her job.

“You are rather like a prophet of old, I think.”

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She smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment and not a comment on my age. When you are finished reading, I need to talk with you privately.”

“Of course.” Daniel poured himself another cup of tea and watched Clara sip hers. So elegant in every movement. Not the awkward spectacle she thought herself to be.

Her hair slipped from a loose bun, but she didn’t hasten to fix it. Just as well, it suited her soft complexion. Her dark blue gown wasn’t as rich as her others, but it suited her too. Modest contentment that she didn’t feel but desired to put on.

Losh, he had a propensity to analyze the most unimportant things. “I had better read you those letters before we lose our privacy.”

She nodded with a quiet “Yes.” She pulled the two missives from her apron pocket.

He took them and slipped his finger beneath the seal. She recoiled from the sound, pulled a pillow to her lap and held tight. What did she expect them to contain? “Are you ready to hear them?” Was he?

She shook her head. “No. I almost burned them before you came.”

Certainly not expecting good news. “If you need to wait, I will come again.”

“It will plague me if I do not know. There will be no sleep, and God knows I need some time away from the darkness. ”

“Very well.”

The first letter was short. A shame, coming from one's own mother. But hadn't his own mother been too busy to write often?

My Dear Clara,

We miss you in England, especially your Grandmother who sends her love. Your father has been busy with business and gun collecting. We visit the theatre tomorrow and we shall think of you, of course. You were always fond of Much Ado About Nothing .

I do hope the slaves have not given any trouble.

All my love,

Mother

And that was it. The large loopy handwriting had filled the page to seem as if it were long enough, therefore sufficient. It had only taken a moment to read. For a mother to write such nothingness and pay for it to be sent overseas? Seemed strange.

But it was not his place to judge. She had signed "All my love." He hoped she meant it. The placid look on Clara's face told him of her indifference to the slight letter. "Shall I go on?"

"Is there more to mother's letter?"

"Ah, no. There isn't." Clara didn't seem surprised.

"Lucy's, please."

"I believe she wrote a novel while away. I don't believe I've ever received a letter as

thick as this. She must care about you a great deal.”

Clara opened her mouth to speak, but her chin only quivered. She covered it momentarily with her handkerchief and put on her stoic face.

He read through the pleasantries, the daily dealings of the wealthy life of London, the balls, the theatre, the suppers. Three pages of detailed descriptions. The fourth page offered a hint of other things, of personal nature. Clara had all but turned her head from him as he read .

You must forgive our parents, Clara. While they did not do right by you keeping you from your former life, I do believe you would be miserable here.

There’s so much you would miss. It is difficult to speak of these things, but I find the distance makes it easier.

However, I miss you with all my heart and would do anything to take away what happened at the ball the night before we left.

Belle has been called many names. I think “snake” is my best description.

Even so, the loss of your engagement was not her doing.

Nor is the pending courtship between him and myself.

I did not desire it in the beginning, but father has shown me how it will benefit the family to do so, and will please them greatly.

In my heart, I know that it is fortune that pleases our parents. Christian’s attentions have been difficult to receive, but I assure you, Clara, he grieves your loss. I wonder if the fortune pleases his father as well?

I have not made my decision yet, pray for me Clara. I do not want you forever angry with me if I do marry him, but I do not know if it is true wisdom to marry for finances. Mother says I'll be glad of it in the end, but you know, I've rarely seen her truly happy.

Now is the time for the hardest news of all, though our parents have not announced it to Alice and me yet.

I feel I must give you fair warning. Mother has demanded of Father to stay in London.

Grandmother is aging. She also says that she's given the best of her youth to the American frontier and desires to remain here.

Father considers selling the farm. He will sell if I do not marry Christian.

He plans to give him half the land and continue to profit from tobacco and horses. ..."

Daniel paused to glance at Clara. Her stoic face had melted. He continued, softening his voice.

Lucy wrote the same apologies as she had earlier in the letter. The girl needed permission from her older sister to be courted by Christian. What a strange triangle. The deep pain was obvious from Clara's expression .

The thick letter dwindled until he came to the final page, which was a letter unto itself.

"I have urgent news. It has just been discovered that Alice is with child. She is very ill. It is certain that we will remain in London for another year. I don't know when I shall see you again..."

Daniel slowed as he read ahead. He glanced at Clara again.

Tears wet her face. Dear God, so much dreadful news from her own family.

After scanning ahead quickly, he dared not read the final paragraphs aloud.

They would crush her. The letter had wounded her enough.

Perhaps she would have been right to burn it and not know what the rest contained. Poor woman. His heart hurt for her.

He folded the letters and handed them back. She did exactly that. Without difficulty, she walked the few paces to the fire screen and pitched them over. The fire licked higher forever erasing the words that might be her undoing.

“Clara.” He used her first name without meaning to. “I will pray for you.” He found her hand and stroked the back of it—like he’d done half the day for Old Ruby who lived alone five miles out. “You should know that men of honor do exist. There are those who would not abandon you.”

“Would you call my father a man of honor? My family was wrong to leave me.”

“Yes, very likely.”

“You do not disagree?”

“It is obvious.”

“What should I do, Reverend?”

“Forgive them. All of them.”

“They have not asked for it.”

“That’s one of the hardest things to do. Forgiving without expectation of justice.”

“Have you forgiven in such a manner before?” He immediately recalled the thoughtless word he’d overheard .

Mrs. Ramshaw slipped in and perched on the other side of the sofa. “What a thing to ask the Reverend, Clara!”

Had he? Had he forgiven Effie—and the ones who were willing to side with money instead of truth? Daniel rose to go. “We were merely conversing, Mrs. Ramshaw. No harm done.”

“I daresay you do enjoy a good debate. Clara, thank Reverend Merrick for reading to you this evening.”

“Thank you, Reverend.”

Her eyes shimmered, her green eyes brilliant.

He should have read her the rest of the letter.

He knew that now. Shame on him for keeping it from her!

That wasn’t his decision to make. She deserved the full truth and let God deal with her as He would.

What did he think, that he was God? Or had it been Providential that he prevent her further pain?

He'd pray on it. But the depth of his guilt betrayed the answer. "I will come read to you again tomorrow."

Without comment, Clara turned away from him and climbed the open stairway like an apparition, ghostly white and seeing into nothing. He watched as she disappeared from sight. Silent, sad.

Mrs. Ramshaw faced him. "If you come so often, people might think you are courting her. You had better wait until next Sunday, if you will. In the meantime, stay another hour, will you? We have a slave to set free."

A warm sense of danger spread across his chest. He thought he knew how to set men free—but did he really?

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Clara's stomach lurched as she climbed back down the stairs. Her family may decide to live in London? Did they ever care if they saw her again? Her head throbbed. Her stomach needed mint tea. Jenny would fix some.

She stepped through the narrow hall and into the kitchen. "Jenny? I hope you are still here..."

"Yes, chile. You done turned green."

A warm hand touched her brow.

"You ain't hot, that's good."

"Mint tea—or ginger, please."

Ten minutes later, Clara rested the warm mug against her forehead, removing it at intervals to sip. The headache cracked on, but at least her stomach had calmed.

Jenny left for bed and took Morrie with her. So quiet, one would hardly think she was in the room. No one ever had to guess with Jenny. Her movements gave her away.

She put her mug on the table and breathed deeply. Nothing like being quiet and alone. Except for Mrs. Ramshaw and Reverend Merrick's muted conversation from the other room, nothing but the fire crackled in her hearth.

Reverend Merrick had been kind to read the letters to her. She hated the fact that her family problems were open for him to see. Now he knew everything. The thought

was downright embarrassing .

Was it a fact of blindness that nothing could be private? That she could never do anything for herself?

Reverend Merrick's voice moved closer to the kitchen door. She heard him clearly.

"Just because you and the other anonymous ladies have set your sights on Morrie doesn't mean you should break the law. Besides, where could she go? How do you plan to see her to safety?"

Ramshaw's voice shook. "In my eyes, the law has already been broken. In God's eyes too. Was her family not stolen from Africa? Is not rape a crime?"

Clara covered her mouth. Morrie had been forced to...? Couldn't have happened on her estate. Never . Father wouldn't allow it.

"I agree with you. But Morrie is a slave, and nothing but the law can change that."

"Have you no mercy?" Incredulity laced her voice.

He impatiently responded, "I've all the mercy Christ must feel on her behalf. I will trust her to Him."

"That's too simple and entirely takes responsibility off of your shoulders.

Look, we've managed to hide that she's with child.

" Her hands clapped. "Imagine, we shall save two lives, altogether. It will be easy to shuttle her from house to house until we can arrange the escape. I've been teaching her to read for that exact purpose. "

“What kind of life will she have once she reaches...where is it you wish to send her?”

“New York. I was hoping your family might make the perfect connection.”

The good reverend sighed loudly.

Clara nearly showed herself. They had no right to steal her father’s property!

“You think New York is above the law?”

“No, but Canada is. Or the west. She could move out there.”

“Away from family and friends? ”

“No, Reverend. To freedom. Even the Israelites had to wander the desert for a time.”

Reverend Merrick was quiet for a minute.

“Listen, the Shaker community, twenty miles down towards the river, believes as we do on the subject of slavery. I have a few friends who joined long ago. I visit them on occasion. They have helped more than a few slaves—think of it, Daniel, they are so close to the river. It’s perfect.”

“Why do you need my help? Seems you have it figured out.”

“When Morrie gets to New York, she’ll need to board with your family.” Mrs. Ramshaw’s pled with him. “Convince them to help us. You’ll do that, won’t you?”

Clara shook her head. She had no idea Mrs. Ramshaw was involved in anything so... dangerous . If a runaway was caught, they were whipped. She’d only seen it happen once, by mistake. She was ten years old and supposed to be at her lessons.

She'd sneaked to the orchard for an apple. And watched the shocking drama unfold when a black man had been tied to a fence post, his naked body exposed. At the first strike, she'd run as if her own life had been at stake. Night was filled with tears.

The rule was simple, her father explained. Don't run, don't get whipped. They had a job to do and weren't able to survive without his help.

"Mrs. Ramshaw, I understand that you are perfectly serious. I will pray on the matter. It is not an easy one. But I must declare that I don't feel personally called end slavery. We shall see."

He daren't help Mrs. Ramshaw steal Morrie. Too worried about his own skin, and rightly so.

He'd shuffled to his feet. "Before I go, I need to tell you that Clara received some letters from her family today. I read them to her."

She masked a gasp .

"She could use some extra kindness."

Clara fumed. Furious. He wasn't supposed to tell!

Why did he think he could? He promised her!

Men were not to be trusted. Hadn't she already learned that lesson?

Did he think he was honorable when he said that some men would not abandon her as Christian had?

As if he had the same kind of honor. She could spit in his face. Would have if he'd

been closer.

She slammed the mug onto the kitchen table. Didn't care who heard.

Mrs. Ramshaw and Daniel walked through the swinging kitchen door. She believed they must be staring at her.

"Oh my. What are you doing down here?" Mrs. Ramshaw said.

"I live here, do I not? Though I have often requested to go home. If you do not wish me to enjoy this kitchen, then please do let me know ahead of time."

Reverend Merrick spoke. "You overheard us, didn't you?"

Clara didn't have to say anything.

Mrs. Ramshaw reached out to Clara. "Can we trust you to keep the secret?"

Clara shrugged. "No one visits. Who would I tell?"

Mrs. Ramshaw lightly squeezed her arm. "More than one life is at stake if this gets out."

"You should be more careful," Clara said. "From what I understand, trust in any man is volatile."

Reverend Merrick grumbled. "Any man, Miss Stanton?"

"Any and always."

She turned from them and climbed the back stairway. Too much. Life happened

around her and she remained out of orbit, like a forgotten star.

Perhaps she would escape with Morrie. She'd provide the perfect cover...a blind person could never be a part of a nefarious plan. What was she doing, playing devil's advocate ?

She put on her nightgown and crawled into the brick-warmed bed and wrestled with the forever darkness.

AS TIRED AS HE WAS , Daniel slept fitfully.

Something about Clara's change of emotions bothered him.

Girls always had moods, but this was different.

She had gone from being kind and happy to see him to—well—spiteful.

Grateful for his assistance in reading those letters.

Understandably sad. But he'd been tender with her.

Why had she been so...angry?

He tried to recall the conversation about seeing Morrie to freedom. Surely the life of one slave girl wouldn't set her on edge? Well, perhaps Mrs. Ramshaw would talk gently with her about abolition. She would understand and not be so offended.

For once, he was grateful the girl was blind and couldn't write to tell her father. Just being party to such a conversation put him at risk, and if he wanted to keep his pastorate, no one could find out. Ever.

Honestly, the whole business scared him. He was no Moses, and no burning bush had caught fire in front of him. Unless Mrs. Ramshaw herself was a dangerous flame. He imagined her magnitude of gray hair on fire and laughed despite his fears. Without a doubt, the woman had spirit.

He moaned and punched his pillow. It wasn't his lot in life to please his parishioners, either.

Each wanted him to agree with them, do as they wished, go where they told him, say long glorious prayers, which he was no good at, and buy all his goods from Green's and not Young's.

The countering view, of course, was that he should purchase everything from Young's and not Green's.

But where one made purchases was a far cry from uncaging young Morrie. Which was more dangerous—a life on her own, or with others who could potentially protect her? Would she be as much prey outside as in? Lord? Your input would be appreciated .

Good thing Francine was coming. He needed her spontaneous laughter. Hopefully by the next time Mrs. Ramshaw cornered him, the whole plan would be discarded. And another, more reasonable plot in place. If they turned in the nasty man who'd raped her instead...that would be a start.

He tried to pray for Clara. Thankful that God heard his prayer, even though he was too tired to formulate the words.

He slipped off in a dream. Clara's hand was tucked in his arm.

And on and on they traveled through a foggy Kentucky countryside.

They could not see where they tread. She tried to pull away. ..he held her fast...

When he woke by a rooster's crow, he could not shake the vision. At last he knew. He'd broken her confidence. Completely and utterly. That's why she'd been angry. He'd promised not to mention the letters to Ramshaw.

He'd been so tired and only wanted to make sure Clara had an easy time of it.

How often had he preached about the difference between gossip and prayer requests?

Losh, he was no better than a biddy, however unintended.

But she had heard him—that's why she'd said what she did about placing trust in any man. She was talking of him.

The girl needed to calm down. He'd spoken out of kindness, whether she could see that or not. It was her choice to wallow in self-pity or move on. He couldn't make that decision for her.

After he revealed the final portion of the letter, he'd get Francine to take over reading chores. He needed to stay out of her way and give God room to squeeze into the eternal equation. "And that," he concluded, "is my job."

It would have been easy to keep this conviction, except the very next evening, he dreamt of her again, moving about in thick fog, danger imminent.

The image was difficult to shake, so he tried to focus on his sermon.

Didn't work. He'd have to reveal what the end of the letter said: that Lucy and Christian had set a wedding date .

An idea slammed him. It was a bad idea. Perilous. The girl needed a husband, didn't she? He might woo her. Well, why not? She would love him enough not to reveal that he was involved in Morrie's escape. Protection for him. And, of course, he could lead her to Jesus...

Cat pawed through the study door.

"I am not getting enough sleep. One can't catch a girl like you catch a mouse. Much more complicated. I'd be doing it for the safety of my own hide, too. Rotten of me. Thank the Lord, I've more sense than to follow through with such crazy plans."

Daniel stroked the cat and prayed until God's peace flooded him. Overwhelming his ridiculous notions. He didn't have to know the next step. Only obey and give glory to God in everything he put his hands to.

A better idea came. Years had passed since his father died.

Together, they'd spent many hours carving canes for the poor and those who needed a 'gift from the hand', as Father liked to call it.

He took out his knives from the chest, unused since the casket closed over the face of his father forever.

If anyone came to his door today, he'd not be found. He was going on a hike. His heavy heart lifted from all his duties...and the difficult decision about Morrie.

He trusted God to lead him in the heavy things. Why not the light ones as well? God would lead him to the right piece of wood, at just the right moment.

He packed lunch of cold biscuits, country ham, and a canteen of water. His New Testament bulged from an inner pocket. He donned his hat and dashed out of sight

before Old Ruby's relatives flagged him down.

THE NEXT MORNING, DANIEL invaded Mrs. Kilgore's workspace for carving. After some two hours of hiking the day before, he'd found the perfect branch. He had already sawed it to size and stripped the bark away. He'd spend most of his day carving and sanding.

A pot of rich coffee steamed beside him. Mrs. Kilgore even seemed to be in a good mood, breakfast had been delicious.

He used glass to sand, short firm strokes around all portions of the long, slender cane.

Once the wood was stained, the rich cherry color would surface.

Too bad she'd never see it. But she would feel the smoothness, no rough parts.

Nothing to hurt her. He would not do only half a job as he once tried in his youth.

His father had urged him to do his best, even for the wretch—in his opinion—that was to receive the cane.

A drunkard, he'd stumbled in front of a coach.

They had visited him in the infirmary, and promised a new walking stick to the man with a broken hip and a crushed foot.

Such was the price for drowning a sorrow.

It had been his first cane. No matter that they had money enough to buy canes to give away.

His father explained that gifts of this kind needed to come from his own hands.

It wouldn't be enough to merely pay for an item.

He wanted Daniel to feel the effort, to know what it meant to give hours away, to see the glory of God come to a man that did not expect it.

The work had been half frustrating at times.

He didn't always feel the glory. Some men didn't deserve the fine gift.

His father had said it once: that was the point.

None of us do. The gift was about mercy and grace.

What happened with the old drunk had changed Daniel's life.

With the stick's help, the man now stumbled along in a straight line, right into the den of his addiction.

He loudly and lovingly preached a sermon to those who would listen.

An act of kindness had opened that door—and the man led a few precious souls to the love of the Savior .

Daniel slowed his strokes and ran his hand down the wood. "One thought leads to another," his father had said, "A cane or a cross...a shepherd's crook or a Moses' staff..."

A Moses' staff...freedom. Freedom for captives. Daniel closed his eyes. Lord.

“You aren’t sick, are you Reverend?” Mrs. Kilgore drew near.

“Sometimes God’s messages are loud, aren’t they?” He knew what he had to do.

“I’ve heard a preacher yell before an’ some take to shoutin’. I can’t abide it.” Her hands were firmly planted on her hips. “Wanted you to know where I stand.”

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Clara sat through the tea with poise and polish. She was, after all woman of money and manners. Mary Winters sat opposite her with, no doubt, the same kind of self-assurance. Mrs. Ramshaw dared not let such an invitation go unreturned.

Clara had not forgiven Mary or the others. The fact that it was Mary's idea to dangle things before her face to test her sight, made this proper tea all the more comical. How could she punish her? The darkness was forcing her to become more creative.

Ah, she had the perfect idea. "Mrs. Ramshaw, the ribbon I brought home from my outing, the one to go on my bonnet...what color is it?"

"Why don't you know? It is a yellowish-green, I would say. Don't you agree Jenny?"

"I reckon so, Ma'am." The words came out slowly.

Clara sipped her tea with a smile. Mary was likely shocked over Jenny joining them for tea. "How odd. Mary here assured me it was as brilliant a blue as could be found."

Mary coughed. "Perhaps you mixed the ribbons up, Clara, at the counter? You merely need to complain to Mrs. Young. She'll return your money."

"If you had not taken the green from my hands yourself, I would have agreed. "

Mrs. Ramshaw cleared her throat. "I'm sure it was a simple mistake. Here, have some gingerbread. I think green a fine color at any rate. Blue reminds me of bruises."

"How ghastly, Mrs. Ramshaw," laughed Mary.

Clara folded her hands in her lap. “I am in a unique situation, you know. While I’ve lost sight, my other senses seem to have grown stronger. I hear more than I used to, Mary. At church, on the street...I hear how my friends amuse themselves.” She bit into the gingerbread.

Mary wasted no breath ignoring Clara’s comment. “Have you heard of Lucy’s engagement? Mother received a letter. The wedding is set for next spring. I’m to be a bridesmaid, what do you think?”

“Indeed? Next spring...” Lucy’s letter had not been a formal announcement. She’d only heard a hint of the possibility. Lucy would not reveal her engagement until Clara had been informed. Would she?

CLARA PUT HER OLD GOWN on and lay the tea dress aside for Jenny to hang. Christian’s affections were based solely on money. She should be glad to avoid getting caught in such an empty marriage.

The fact that her family left her out of Lucy’s news made her feel as though her feelings and opinions had no importance. None whatsoever.

If only there were some way she could appeal to her parents—write them a letter of her own accord. She twisted her fingers, mad for something to do. Something to bring them home. But did she really want them back? Weren’t they planning to be away for a year?

If she had her own news to tell, they might come rushing home. Alice could stay behind at Grandmother’s in disgrace. She could tell them about Morrie’s escape. Clara drummed her fingers on the bed. What if Morrie wasn’t the only one who escaped? What if the plan was much bigger?

If she could somehow get word to her father, he would gain her trust...and maybe

listen to her about other things. Include her once again. Treat her as a daughter.

Mrs. Ramshaw knocked on her door. “Clara, Reverend Merrick is here. Says he needs to see you in private. I do hope you haven’t been encouraging him.”

“Why not?”

“You aren’t ready for a gentleman yet. You bemoan that Grant boy.”

“I do not.”

“You don’t? Oh, good. I am ever so glad to hear it.”

“You don’t have to worry, Mrs. Ramshaw. I do not flirt with any man.”

“Even so, you are elegant, Clara. Men notice you even if you cannot see them. You should join the Shakers and be plain the rest of your life.”

The panic in her heart must have rushed to her face.

“I was joking, dear. You’d never fit in over there! Hurry, now. He says he doesn’t have much time.”

A moment later, she sat in the parlor.

“You need to speak with me?”

“I have a confession to make. It was wrong of me, I know. I didn’t like seeing you so hurt. I did not read the entire contents of that letter aloud.”

“That was not your decision to make.”

“I’ve come to ask your forgiveness. I will tell you what it contains if you still wish to hear it.”

“You speak of trust and forgiveness. I wonder how. ”

He ignored her jab. “The letter informed you that Lucy has set a wedding date after all, and she and Mr. Grant plan to reside on your father’s farm...”

“I have already heard this from Mary Winters at tea time. Lovely way to hear such news.” To reside on the estate?

“There’s more.” He released a long breath. “She asks that...you not attend the wedding.”

A twist of the knife. “That would be awkward, wouldn’t it?” She needn’t worry. There would not be a wedding if she could help it. Lucy would be grateful. Pausing, she waited to see if he’d confess to the rest. Apparently not. “You told Mrs. Ramshaw about the letters. Why?”

“I wasn’t thinking. Long, tiring day. I know that Mrs. Ramshaw cares for you. She feels what you suffer.”

No one could know what she suffered. “I chose to trust you because you are a man of God.”

“If I were God, I wouldn’t be so human. Humans fail, Clara. Over and over. Humans will never get over being humans, you know. Mistakes are made, evil is done.”

“Mrs. Ramshaw keeps hinting at the contents of those letters. I desired privacy.”

“I am so sorry. Truly.”

A silence hung between them. Forgiveness hovered, hopeful. She had no strength to give it.

“Clara, I hoped to talk to you about the other night.”

“About Morrie?”

“Yes.”

“What’s to discuss? Morrie’s a slave. She belongs to my father.”

HE WOULD NOT DISCUSS such matters with her again. Clara had been more than clear. If Mrs. Ramshaw wanted to make plans, she needed to do so away from home. Out of earshot.

He had to let God change Clara’s mind. Daniel kicked a rock to the side of the road and looked up. The sky made no promise of being blue, nor giving rain. Just dull gray.

He stepped into the kitchen and resumed his seat by the fire. He picked up the cane and ran his hands along the length. It had taken all day, but now it was smooth and ready for his carvings.

His father had been fond of creeping vines. So was he. As he pierced the hard wood with his knife, words came to his mind. The Word above all words. “In the beginning was the word, the word was with God and the word was God...” Words connected, linked like vines, truth upon truth.

How many times had that passage stunned him into worship? He longed for others to know.

So far, his congregation appeared duly dutiful. Mrs. Ramshaw was the only soul that showed any outward work of faith. She told him that there were other women that participated in her abolition efforts. Who were they? And was it the Holy Spirit that propelled them?

He prayed so. If God were absent even in good work, only ill would come of it. Good works, without love, a clanging cymbal. Mere noise, never music.

He thought of Morrie as he shaped the wood. She had to be no more than fifteen years old, and already several months pregnant by the man who attacked her. Her pain must be far- reaching.

His thoughts returned to the one in need of the cane. If only Clara were compassionate beyond herself.

A word formed on the staff. He hadn't meant to do it, but the way the vine curled to spell "love." He traced over it with his finger .

Mrs. Kilgore peered over his shoulder. "Some old soul will be glad of that. It's a kind thing you're doing, Reverend."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kilgore. It is for Miss Stanton, however. Help her get about."

She raised her eyebrows. "Will it now?"

"Of course, Mrs. Kilgore. You know I am not courting her."

"I know no such thing, but I daresay you wouldn't lie to me. A preacher doesn't lie."

"Not this one."

“My husband knew one that lied before. I never did.” Her mouth hung open, her cap strings dangled limp.

“That is unfortunate.”

“My niece is being courted. None of us like him. You might try Miss Gray.”

Heat dashed up his collar. “How very kind of you to consider me a worthy candidate. However, I am not sure she would welcome my attention.” He swallowed at the hope of one tiny chance with the beauty.

“You’d be a better match and her mother’ll open the door to you for sure. We’ve already discussed it. Miss Gray’ll be made to give the others’ up.”

“Thank you for informing me. I find myself much too busy to court at the moment.”

“If you say so.” She winked at him. “I’ll have you to my house for dinner soon. I’ll see that she’s there.”

Mrs. Kilgore would likely forget that promise. He smiled and bowed his head.

Daniel pressed his small knife into the wood once more. This was a labor of love. God’s love, not his.

If only he could banish those beautiful sightless eyes from his mind.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

“Clara. I’ve bought you a present.” Mrs. Ramshaw dropped a bundle into her lap. “We’ve many weeks of winter ahead, and I hate to see you go stir-crazy. An early Christmas gift.”

Christmas. She’d nearly forgotten. Clara found the string and untied the package. Something poked through the paper. Sharp tips. She lay aside the wrappings and lifted them, long, slender and smooth. Like long pencils. Beneath the two pencils were soft balls. Knitting supplies—that was it.

“There’s more under the wool.”

Clara felt around the wool. Ribbon.

“Blue, like you wanted. I’ve taken the liberty of ripping out the green from your bonnet.”

“Thank you. I don’t know what to say.” She felt herself smiling.

“I don’t want you to say anything. I want you to knit with those idle hands of yours.”

Clara stroked the long needles. They reminded her of those old women she’d grown up seeing reclined on porches on fine days. Knitting. Always knitting. Must she give in? The thought repulsed, yet intrigued her.

“I’ll show you a stitch after supper. Oh, I almost forgot.

I’ll not make you suffer the likes of Mary Winters again.

Forgive me, Clara. I had no idea.” Her voice raised a notch.

“Another thing, and you may hate me for saying this, but if I wasn’t a Christian woman, I’d wallop your father. I’d give Lucy a piece of my mind too.”

“Now I don’t know whether to love them—or hate them.”

“Oh child. I was wrong to speak as I did. I’ve got more than one resentful bone in my body and the Lord’s got to weed them out. Love them if you can. If you can’t, ask God for help. Apparently, I need to do the same. We mustn’t hate. Never that.”

The woman was kind, Clara dared not deny that.

Too kind actually. Enough so to set slaves free even those that didn’t belong to her.

..she hadn’t decided yet what to do yet with that knowledge.

Thankfully, she still had time. Morrie would be with them until after her child was born, that was certain.

It all depended. Her latest thought was to send Father a message that she had urgent news that could only be delivered in person.

She would meet her family in England, be rewarded for a thwarted theft.

And Lucy would certainly listen to reason.

And Christian could jump into the Thames, for all she cared.

DANIEL RUBBED A FINAL coat of light stain on the cherry cane and rested it in the corner to dry. It was beautiful. The best cane he’d ever carved. When he was

young, a good attitude was all he needed to complete a project well.

This one had something more. He finally understood what his father had tried to teach him in his youth. Caring for others might be the result of duty, but only devotion turned the gift into hope. And love.

With actions that always had surprising outcomes. Everything one did in life mattered...How much one loved God, how much one was willing to love His other children...That mattered most.

He'd never felt the inner cry to love a certain woman. He'd blushed around more than one, especially Miss Gray. His mother had called him out as far too particular .

True, he'd written a list of qualifications when he was twenty. Mother had been appalled. Father had laughed and said, "You think you know what you need, but only God does."

"But I based everything from Scripture. How can you make light of this?"

"Your list is unattainable for any human, let alone a woman."

"She might at least strive for such perfection," Daniel had said.

"Your list, how many rules are here, what? Twenty-seven? There are only ten commandments my boy."

He had shrugged his shoulders, annoyed by the mocking tone.

"Twenty-seven stones to cast away every woman you meet," His father's merry eyes twitched in the firelight.

“You think I should make a new list?”

“Aye, you should. A short one.” His father held the paper close to the flame that glowed through the parchment, the words brightened. Good words, he had thought. They caught flame and quickly turned to ash. His time wasted.

His parents were supposed to be proud of their wise son.

“What would you put on the list, Father?” Perhaps he should have asked sooner.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Love your neighbor as yourself. This, my son, is the best list. But it is your list. You live this list and wait patiently for Him to bring you a wife. And when He does, you’ll have no doubt.”

Daniel still had the new list. He’d kept it in his wallet for the past ten years. He gazed at the cane he’d carved for Clara.

Just the thought of courting her set his heart to thumping.

“I EXPECTED YOUR FATHER to inform you of my upcoming visit. Are you sure he never told you a thing?” Dr. Rosenthal’s voice sounded concerned.

“He did not inform me, though he might have written to me about it. Unfortunately, I cannot read my own letters, as you know.” Clara held herself erect.

Had Daniel somehow left out more information?

Memories of her last visit—she’d like to forget.

The feel of his face beneath her hands had been much too intimate. Though

interesting.

“Perhaps he meant to tell you and forgot. Have you experienced any headaches of late?”

“Truthfully, Dr. Rosenthal, my only issue is blindness. If you haven’t a cure, then perhaps you are wasting our time.”

“My notes say you had a fever at the time of the fall.”

“After the fall, I think. I was hardly lucid.”

“How long were you ill?”

“A week? Two?”

“I’m not certain that a fall alone can cause your condition. I’m concerned that you’ve had an infection that was not properly dealt with. However, if it had...”

“You are saying that my blindness might have been prevented?” The thought singed.

“Your doctor is an old man, isn’t he?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Old men use old ways. I have a proposition for you, Miss Stanton.”

“A proposition?”

“Come back with me to Louisville. There is a new surgery. Mind you, I have never performed it myself, but I have seen it done many times.”

“Surgery?”

“Yes. ”

“You will cut around my eyes?” Her hand instinctively reached for them. She held them there without thinking. Protectively.

His hands took hers and pulled them down. He avoided her question.

“I might not succeed...”

Except a sliver of hope infused the moment. “I don’t know what to say. Does my father know?”

“I hope he has received the letter by now. I pray he does not object. Tip your head back and let me get a good look at your eyes. Lean this way,” he guided her, “into the sunlight.”

She followed the pressure of his hands, trusting, leaning.

“I can see that I’ve given you much to consider. Take your time. I will call again in the morning before I head home to Louisville. You might return with me. I thought while I was here, I’d take advantage of the healing springs. Does its magic work?”

Spring water? How could one think of water when a miracle might be at hand?

He gently squeezed one of her hands. “Then that is your prescription for the time being. I shall inform Mrs. Ramshaw.”

Clara grimaced. She’d been made to drink the stuff so much lately. Little good it did.

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Clara listened as the fire snapped among fresh logs. She and Francine sat together while Mrs. Ramshaw showed off Morrie's reading capabilities to the Reverend.

"What brings you to Harrodsburg?"

"Want to know something scandalous?" Francine shuffled beside her. "I'm running from a man."

"Oh, is he dangerous?"

"No, only irritating. He gives me these prolonged stares and polite nods. I can hardly abide them."

"I suppose he's not handsome enough to be permitted these attentions."

"Well a few weeks ago, he stepped onto the street with ink stains across his upper lip. Can you even imagine?"

She certainly could. Clara laughed at the image. "He did not see himself or might have avoided it. I live in fear of unknowingly decorating myself with ink."

"I hope I did not offend. Honestly, it was not so much the ink stain as the staring and lurking. He shows up at the most inopportune times and places."

"For your sake, I pray he does not follow you here."

"I have forbidden Mother to tell him my whereabouts, but our circle know Daniel's

um...unique circumstance and to where he's been booted."

"Booted?" What was this ?

"I'm sure I mustn't speak of it. He'd kill me and send me back. And that would mean the continued advances of an unwanted man."

"I am sad for your slighted man." Clara smiled.

"Don't be. I am praying another woman catches his fancy and soon."

Clara laughed again. She liked Reverend Merrick's sister. What did she look like? As tall as he? Dark hair? Was she the least bit fashionable?

"What color dress do you wear?" It was out of her lips before she realized.

"Brown. It's all rumpled from the trunk. Oh, I am weary. I long to be in bed, though I hate to take leave of you. Mrs. Ramshaw has mentioned your desire to knit."

"Has she?"

"I'd be happy to teach you. We can start any time you say."

"Thank you...but, I may be taking a trip of my own soon."

"Really? Where will you go?"

"Only to Louisville. Not far."

A deeper voice invaded. "You travel to Louisville? That specialist again?"

Clara jumped. She had not sensed his presence. “Yes, the specialist. Your sister is very tired, I believe.”

“May I offer my service as escort in your father’s absence?”

“The specialist will take me back with him.”

“He cannot examine you here? How very strange. Is he a family friend?”

“Not exactly. Your sister was just telling me—”

He cut in. “When do you leave?”

“On the afternoon train. I shall be quite alright of course.”

He grunted uncertainty. “Well, Francine. Let’s get you home and let this family settle in for the night. ”

Clara stood, relieved. The less that was known about her choice, the better. No one’s business but her own anyway.

THE MORE SHE THOUGHT about it the more Clara seethed. Daniel’s tone reeked of self-righteousness. Didn’t Jenny have something else to do other than beat batter, pretending not to hear? “Does no one keep a confidence anymore? You are not my guardian.”

“Mrs. Ramshaw would risk her life for you. She told me your plan because she fears for your safety.” His words snipped like sharp scissors, spoiling any generous thought she’d ever had towards him. “It isn’t right for you to go off with a stranger. Not proper.”

“It should be of little concern to her.”

“It is every concern of hers! Pardon me, Miss Stanton, but I thought you were more intelligent than that.”

“I refuse to be insulted.” Clara tried to leave, Reverend Merrick held her in place.

“You and I are not finished.”

“Aren’t we?” She turned her face away.

“All we ask is that you wait for your father’s approval. The surgery may be dangerous.”

Dr. Rosenthal had not mentioned danger. In fact, he’d only been encouraging.

“What if you died? Mrs. Ramshaw would have to answer for that.”

“I take my life in my own hands, Reverend . If my family was concerned about my life, they wouldn’t have left me alone.”

“Mrs. Ramshaw informed me of this possible surgery for fear she would not be able to physically stop you. She’s scared out of her wits.” He puffed. “After taking off on that horse, who can blame her?”

“Dr. Rosenthal has written to Father. ”

“Then you must wait for his answer. I will not let you get on that train with that man.”

“If I wait any longer, then the chances for recovery are slim.”

“Is that what he told you?”

Not hardly, but the strain of waiting pulled like a horse against his bit.

“I pity you, but sometimes God asks us to do hard things.”

“Hard things! Do you even know what I’ve suffered? You talk of honor. And respect for my father’s wishes, for Mrs. Ramshaw’s feelings, and yet my deepest desire—my deepest need must go unmet, all because...all because...why Reverend Merrick? Why do you desire to keep this from me? Your Jesus...”

“My Jesus, Clara?”

“Your Jesus healed the blind. It doesn’t make sense that you don’t also jump at the chance for my possible healing.”

“Clara.” Reverend Merrick’s hands lifted from her arms, the chill of the room replacing his warmth. “I pray for your healing every day. But your eyes aren’t the only part of you that matters to me. Or Him.”

She felt the pressure of a finger beneath her eye, catching a tear.

“When Dr. Rosenthal comes, I will explain it to him. Any gentleman worth his salt would not ask you to compromise yourself in such a way.”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“Clara,” he whispered. “Don’t give up hope. Your father will respond soon, very likely. We can discuss it then. We will help you, do right by you.”

Clara wiped her eyes. “You—Mrs. Ramshaw—you fear you cannot trust me. That I

will run on the slightest whim?”

Silence. “You can’t blame her.”

“I am not a child, Reverend Merrick.”

“One glance gives that away. ”

“I...” A bell sounded at the door.

“I think that was Mrs. Ramshaw letting the doctor in. Yes, he is here.”

Clara nodded.

“Have you a handkerchief? Jenny’s apple butter—good stuff.” He lightly touched a place on her chin and gently wiped away the smear.

Doctor Rosenthal was all business. Very congenial to Mrs. Ramshaw and Reverend Merrick.

“Is it true what Miss Stanton says, that the longer she waits for the operation, the less likely for recovery?”

“I can’t really know that until I actually operate, but in most cases, time is of essence.” She could sense the concern in his voice.

“How long ago did you write to Mr. Stanton?” Mrs. Ramshaw asked.

“A month ago, to be exact.”

Clara gave a soft smile.

“It will be at least two more weeks before he sees it,” Reverend Merrick said. Fingers drummed on the table beside her.

Clara folded her arms. “Will two months make a difference, Dr. Rosenthal?”

“We will pray it won’t.”

He patted Clara’s hand. “I must go or I will miss the train.”

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” asked Reverend Merrick.

“Certainly not.”

They walked out the door leaving a cold draft.

Clara went back to her room. Her satchel lay across the bed, latched and ready to move on to her new life. But she could be patient. It was only eight weeks. Please, Father. Please respond with haste.

CLARA TAPPED HER FINGERS across the windowsill. Why hadn’t she thought of it sooner? A bargain might be struck. “Everyone will get what they want. Everyone happy.”

An hour later, Reverend Merrick sat across from her. Clara poured tea, silently counting how many seconds filled the cup.

“How is Francine settling in?” A gentle volley.

“She’s been asleep most of the day.”

“I suspect a trip from New York is no picnic.”

“Not the least bit pleasant. What is it you wanted to see me about?”

“I want to know what you discussed with Dr. Rosenthal on the way to the train station.”

“Oh, the normal conversation one has with a new acquaintance. The weather mostly.”

“I thought since conversations were no longer considered particularly private, you might have some information to offer me in exchange.”

“In exchange for my mistake? I apologized for that, Clara. I did not mean you harm. I was overly tired that day.”

“And I am tired of being left out of conversations about me.”

“That is no one’s choice but yours.”

“I’d rather not repeat this morning’s disagreement. We both know that even though I am a woman, I am bound to obey the rules of others. I simply want to know if your discussion concerned me.”

He remained silent.

“You did talk about me. I can sense it.”

“I will put it bluntly, Clara. We only discussed you and your operation in medical terms. Details your sensitive ears might not be able to endure.”

“I daresay he won’t turn me into some sort of monster. ”

“He showed me where the cuts are to be made. Scars will remain. As you know, there

are always risks.” He swallowed the tea. “Infection...fever...what if you aren’t strong enough to fight it off?”

“Things can’t get any darker, can they?”

“True, from your perspective. I, for one, want you to live.”

“How kind.” Her tone betrayed her feelings.

“A friend of mine died from having a simple surgery. He was supposed to be recovered in months, instead, I stood by his grave after two weeks. Two weeks, Clara, and his life was over. Just a lad. Sixteen.”

Why did he want to frighten her?

“I know you resent my involvement, but Mrs. Ramshaw’s request could not be refused.”

Enough. “Reverend Merrick, I have an offer to make.” It was time.

“An offer?”

Clara sipped her tea. She must get this right.

“You want to steal a Stanton slave. Morrie. You and Mrs. Ramshaw wish to set her and her child free. As for me, I wish to have this operation.” She paused.

“If you let me do this now, I will not inform Father of your abolitionist activities. Nor will I inform our overseer or the sheriff. You may take as many slaves as you want. I don’t care. ”

Silence met her. Didn't he hear what she told him? He should be elated.

Fury edged his voice. "And if Mrs. Ramshaw and I do not comply, you will put both of our lives in danger and give us away? And force Morrie to remain forever a slave?"

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Clara leaned back in breathless, wordless confusion. Had he misunderstood her simple offer? The bargain was a good one. Noise garbled up. “I believe that is what I said. My surgery for their freedom. ”

The teacup jerked from her hands, warm wet poured into her lap. Reverend Merrick gripped her shoulders. “Who are you to play with life and death?” His seething breath swept across her, shaming her.

“You are making this complicated.” Clara shook her head. “It doesn’t have to be. Simply agree with Mrs. Ramshaw and let me go. As soon as Christmas has passed.” Clara’s throat constricted. “You don’t want to send a kind old woman to jail do you?” A threat she didn’t mean to make.

“I will spare you no detail. Say what you will to the sheriff or your father. He left Kentucky for more reasons than one and don’t believe for an instant that you were his only or even primary problem.”

“What are you talking about?” Whatever did he mean?

“Are you familiar with certain evils committed by cruel men towards women?”

Clara’s throat constricted. “What are you insinuating?”

“Morrie. She was raped. Repeatedly. This time, she expects a child. You want to know who raped her, Clara? Your father.”

Hot tears slipped in fury. “ How dare you .” Clara trembled, his hands squeezed her

shoulder. Kept her in place.

“She’s not the only one. There are others.”

No. No, no, no . “That’s against the law.” Wasn’t it? How did he know this? Mrs. Ramshaw? “If it’s true, they would have asked for help.” Her Father? Never...

“In this town? You honestly believe these girls have rights? And you think you are bound by shackles of darkness! There is no way out, no help unless we get them out and away from here. God does not want us to stand by and watch.”

“Your words are noble, but I assure you my father would never do this.” He was a married man.

“By what are you certain? Jenny saw him, Clara. ”

Clara shook her head. “Jenny?” She must have been seeing things. Jenny was getting old. A memory pushed forward. Father at the slave cabins. Being slapped...Silence ever after.

He removed his hands from her shoulders and stood. “She begged me not to tell you but I can see that you refuse to believe the truth of it anyway.” He huffed.

“I do refuse to believe it. The charges you lay at his door are slanderous.”

“Clara, I swear on the Bible that Jenny does not lie.”

“I suppose you have proof.”

“Morrie carries it before her every day.”

“That is not sufficient.”

“What would be sufficient, Clara?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never heard what you are telling me. I don’t even know if I can believe you!” Surely she would have heard something. Sensed a problem between her parents...

“These are difficult times. A slave has no rights. No help. No representation. I might have spared you these words if you had not suggested this selfish bargain. None of us wish to hurt you.”

“Nor did I want to offend you, Reverend Merrick. I only saw it as a means for us all to get what we want. I never desired to stoke a fire...I...” A consuming fire. Life, piece by piece was being burned away. Ash leavings and a charred future. Suppose it was true.

“I don’t know what else to say. It might not help, but your father isn’t the only one who helps himself to the slave women. Mrs. Ramshaw can tell you stories, if you want to understand the reality better.”

Clara tucked her hands into one another. What had she done? Possibly lost the remaining trust she had with the kind people who looked after her. “Hopeless...” she whispered. Nothing was simple anymore .

“Depends on how you look at it. I have all the hope in the world. God sees everything, He has a plan. For you, Clara, if you will have it. For Morrie and her baby. For Jenny. Mrs. Ramshaw. Myself.”

Her head swam.

His hands gripped the back of her chair. “Think on what I have told you. Pray. You must pray.”

Hardly hearing a word he said, her mind twisted, her heart sank.

He spoke again, but not to her. What did he say? “I ask that you heal Clara’s vision, in the name of Jesus in whom I put my trust. Amen.” His words tumbled over her. Bitter tears coursed down her face, fists kneaded the apron in her lap, a pull, a tear. Her own father, evil? How? Why ?

She hadn’t sensed another presence.

“You will not compromise Morrie’s escape.” Mrs. Ramshaw’s voice quavered. “And you are not getting that surgery until we hear from your father, as difficult as that is. And perhaps not even then.”

What care they for approval if he is as treacherous as they say?

Daniel spoke. “Can you keep guard...”

Clara lurched from her chair. She’d run home. Surely, she’d get there. A pair of hands forced her back down into her chair. “Don’t even think about it.”

“I wasn’t going to tell anyone,” she whispered.

“I wasn’t really going to tell.” She sounded like a whining child.

Her chest squeezed with pain, she doubled over.

No surgery. No bargain—a strangeness invaded, her thinking grew cloudy.

Her father's grave sin would sully whatever remnant of honor the Stanton name still held.

Did honor belong only to the seeing? Her tightly knotted corset trapped her lungs.

Gasping. She couldn't get air...To think she'd smugly offered such a plan. ..

It was over. These friends would never trust her again. Shamed. Trapped.

Darkness, and more darkness.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

“How could she?” As he trudged homeward, Daniel steadied himself against the sharp, cold wind. He must not be afraid of the power Clara held, though it faltered before her. Wasted, beautiful, helpless, selfish thing.

He'd carried Clara's slight, limp body to her bed. Watched her breathing to the slow rhythm of her sorrows. Would she never accept her fate? When she woke, hot tears spilled from her eyes.

Mrs. Ramshaw left her with food and tea, but locked the door. “I'll not risk it,” she mumbled. “We can't confine her for long. She may decide to betray us.” Worry wrinkled around her eyes.

“I don't believe the slaves matter a whit to her, doesn't care whether they escape. She hurts too much.” He buttoned his coat, pulled on his gloves.

“Are you so sure of that?”

He nodded. “She only cares for herself. Seeing again.” The knowledge of it made him feel empty inside. Such beauty, wasting away on a fairytale dream. He tried to envision her as God might—the pain increased exponentially. What could she be, if only she allowed the light in?

Eyes smarting, he reflected that there were consequences for every deed, both good and bad. Would he ever be free of these worldly traps and entanglements?

He entered his home to the succulent smells of beef roast. Downright fortifying.

“Francine! You are the best sister that ever lived, have I told you?” He attempted cheer, but Clara held his focus—her wants and fears tumbled with the awful truth he’d revealed.

How could he blurt such damning news about her father?

What was he thinking? He should have dealt with her childish bargaining with grace, but he’d been driven to say what he must.

Francine waved a note in front of his face. “Sleep walking, brother?”

“Who is it from?” He reached out.

“Mrs. Kilgore expects you to dinner. Immediately. Feels sorry for you, I believe.” Her brows rose in humor. “Doesn’t believe I can cook apparently.”

Daniel groaned. Tonight, of all nights. The afternoon had been exhausting. Still uncertain of a positive outcome. Clara, the fool-hearted, desperate creature.

Francine untied her apron. “Have a little roast now, and if your meal is unpalatable, I’ll have some warm on the stove to eat upon your return.”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Mrs. Kilgore apologized. Seems I would make an odd number at the table, and she is afraid of odd numbers. Superstitious.” Francine rolled her eyes.

“For heaven’s sake.” No doubt, his sister needed to get out more.

The corners of her mouth lifted. “She reports that Miss Gray will be there.”

“Yes?” Had his voice gone up a pitch?

A seat by Miss Gray? Easy to look in her direction again, after Clara’s cutting comments. As if her words had any bearing on his courting.

An hour later, dressed in his nicest suit, Daniel prayed over Mrs. Kilgore’s spread with an eloquence that might woo a nun. Of course, he stuttered the “Amen” and knocked a spoon to the ground as he finished .

Miss Gray met his eyes with a generous smile, directly across the wide table.

He was satisfied with her seating arrangement.

Thank God for not answering all his prayers.

Surely most of his nervous transgressions might be unseen at this safe distance and his manhood spared of his own sarcastic imagination.

The supper plodded on and he reminded himself to smile. His mind a-twist with the day’s doings, each bite of food, tasteless. Clara’s stunned face before him, Morrie’s plight ever-nagging at his sleeve.

Daniel forced a laugh, hoping Miss Gray’s statement was meant to be comical. She laughed too. Good. Forget Clara. He needed to listen more closely.

He perched on a wide settee while she sat on an ottoman close by. The other guests were busy with his hosts, and glory of glories, he had Miss Gray to himself for a moment. Now was his chance.

She leaned forward. “Why did you leave New York?” Her rosy cheeks belied no nervousness on her part. “I hear you presided over a large, beautiful church.”

Oh, how had she heard that? “I go where God sends me, doesn’t matter what the church looks like.” Surely, she hadn’t heard the slanderous rumor. His pulse quickened.

She cocked her head to one side. “I hope you do not think our place of worship is lacking?”

“You put words in my mouth, Miss Gray. I think nothing of the sort.” He allowed himself to smile brightly.

She cocked her head. “Your accent isn’t too strange.”

“Thank you. Yours isn’t either.” In the long-term, her humor would brighten the darkest days in the parsonage.

“I find it intriguing. New York has everything and yet you come here.” She leaned in. “I want to go there someday...” Her dreamy eyes focused on something beyond him. Definitely far beyond him. They turned restless, then shaded. As if the night itself had put out the last candle .

New York had conniving Effies, prickly social columns, and a society to dance around. Such falsity would discourage her. “Maybe you can go someday.”

She turned from him to stoke the fire.

He recognized her restlessness. A passionate desire for more. If his presence failed to keep the glow in her face, there was nothing for him here. The fact hit him like an unexpected snowball encasing a rock. Not that he’d tried very hard...

His anticipation soured and his thoughts returned to the unsavory events of the day and the choices set before him. Three women. One that dreamed, one that desperately

dreamed, and the other that hardly knew how.

He thanked the Kilgore's, bowed to Miss Gray, and walked home with a distracted heart. The nation, the church, the people that filled it...

Daniel had a fitful night. Mr. Stanton's face rose before him. A father ought to be the epitome of greatness, an honorable example of Christ, like his own had been. How would he feel if such news landed at his feet? Unthinkable!

He needed to go to Clara. Forgive her. Regret had swept over her with unexpected depth submerging her self-loathing.

Not just for herself, but for her father's evils.

As though they considered her part of the problem.

She hadn't thought through the implications of that hastily made bargain.

With all her might, she wanted to see again. Only recovering her vision mattered.

Plain to see she'd not experienced real love—faithful love, at least. Her abandoned heart merely grasped at flimsy straws. She needed leverage. She needed love. Could he do it?

His heart pounded. Could he love her in such a way that she could actually see Christ?

Could such a thing happen? He rolled the idea around in his mind.

He'd be putting his heart at risk. He recognized his interest in Miss Gray for what it was.

A distraction from what he tried not to feel towards Clara.

Christian Grant was a fool to break his word.

Daniel grinned. But all things work for those that love the Lord, and the Lord knew he loved Him.

He fell across his bed praying as never before, that she might trust Him, and love him too. If that indeed was His will.

CLARA FELT AS THOUGH she could weep no longer. Father, don't do it. Father! Her dream had danced with scenes from her old life. Christian and Father blended into a hulking brute of a man. They dragged Morrie behind them, bound by a tight rope. Crying, stomach protruding.

She nearly screamed for the dream to stop. Whether the nightmare had been Morrie's reality or not, the girl was too young to be with child. Much too young. Tears dripped. Her father's last embrace before his departure seemed tainted with a darkness worse than blindness.

Mrs. Ramshaw had led her to her room hours ago. Story after story fell from her lips in disgust. "All life is sacred, Clara. All of it. You and your plans don't scare me. I'm too old to be scared." It sounded like a promise.

"You spoke with Daniel."

"I eavesdropped. The Reverend is right, you bargain with life and death, only more is at stake than you realize. Such is the price when you tempt darkness."

Clara squeezed a soaked handkerchief. "I thought—hoped—you might quickly agree to my plan." Mrs. Ramshaw was supposed to respect her position.

Feel the weight of obligation. Understand what must be done.

No one gets hurt, everyone gets what they want.

She had no idea her offer would lead to a sickening revelation .

Mrs. Ramshaw left without any of her usual administrations. Clara had clutched her blankets over her head and wept herself to sleep. When she woke, she had no idea of time. She rolled on her side, trying to think but her head pounded.

No, no, no, no, no! She'd gone about everything wrong.

Then she realized. No one else need be involved.

She'd go alone. No threats, no dependency on anyone.

Somehow, she'd get help. After the holidays, she'd make her move.

She'd write a note in pencil to Dr. Rosenthal.

Ask him to meet her at the station. Surgery, sight, new life.

Away from everything and everyone. That could work.

Clara sighed with relief and was finally able to relax beneath her goose down comforter. She'd get out of old Mrs. Ramshaw's way. Daniel and Morrie—and her baby—needn't worry. Her bluff had been called. Poker was not her game.

Meanwhile, she'd somehow live out an apology. Yes, soon she'd move on. For everyone's sake. Reverend Merrick had urged her to pray...she barely had words. So much to repent for, so much... Forgive me, God...

It was a start.

DANIEL ARRIVED ON MRS . Ramshaw's doorstep as early as he dared. He waited by the parlor fire. Clara entered the room, dressed in drab gray. Dark shadows stained beneath red rimmed eyes. Raw with grief.

He reached out, held her hands. Her head dipped down, her long streaming hair hid part of her face. "I am so sorry." Her voice, scratchy. More tears.

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“You are forgiven, Clara.” Her way of life, her pattern of thinking had been brutally challenged. Her personhood and privacy torn away. The life she’d previously led was shattered. “You’ve had to endure more than most. You don’t believe you’ll have much of a life as a blind woman, do you?”

She shook her head.

“I believe you’ve just begun to live.”

He pulled her to his chest, in a light embrace. She gripped his lapels and wept into his coat. The implications if anyone saw him...

He had his own apology to make. “I revealed a terrible truth we’d planned to keep hidden. I am also sorry. No girl should know such things about her father.” At least not one so young.

She shook her head. “Not your fault.”

He fished for a handkerchief and pressed it into her hands.

She cleared her raspy throat. “I did what you told me to do. I’ve been praying. I’ve prayed so much I don’t know what to say anymore. Please tell me that He hears me, that He cares, because I just don’t feel it. I am so ashamed...”

How often her manners danced in step with shame and desperation.

“You’re scared. And you need to know that you aren’t guilty for your father’s crimes.

His sins are not yours. You aren't guilty for your blindness, either.

Or Mr. Grant's cowardice. You aren't guilty for your Mother's cold absence.

"The list grew. "You aren't responsible for how you've been treated by your so-called friends. You're only responsible for you."

"But here..." she pressed a hand to her heart, "The pain squeezes so—I'll go wild if it won't go away."

"Let Him hold it."

"I don't know how."

He'd give anything to see her face light up. To see her move about her days with purpose rather than guilt. If only he could pour the love of Christ right into her—he softly traced a finger around her jaw. She flinched, but didn't let go. Her lips, curvy and bright.

"Why have these things happened to me?"

"For God's ultimate glory. "

"What glory?"

"Ask Him to show you."

"Can you? For me?"

He bent his head, grazed his lips gently across hers. "You are very much loved," he whispered.

She gasped. Footsteps approached and he released her. What had he done? How had he confused the love God asked him to have for her with this? What madness had taken hold of him last night?

Her hand touched where he'd kissed her. She turned away.

But he didn't want to let go. He released her other hand. She found a chair and wrapped her arms around her middle. The door opened. Mrs. Ramshaw. Of course.

"Weeping shall last for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." The old woman shot a wide smile.

"Mrs. Ramshaw?" Clara's voice still scratched. "I need help."

"Yes, darlin'. You surely do." She rested her hands upon Clara's shoulders.

Daniel panicked. Gossip about a private kiss in the parlor might add up to a sudden engagement. His heart thudded. Would Clara tell her? Francine would be furious. He grinned.

"What are you so happy about, Reverend?"

Clara sniffed, but didn't say a word. Fresh tears coursed down her face again, she swiped at them.

"Now, now." Mrs. Ramshaw placed a blanket around her body. "Don't make yourself sick. All's well that ends well."

ALL WAS NOT WELL. NOT by a long shot. Clara sat upon her bed, wondering at Reverend Merrick's words. His soft, tender kiss. I believe you've just begun to live...give it to Him...the glory of God. How he managed to so easily forgive her.. .

She'd nearly asked him to read her some biblical passages. Embarrassment crept in. How often had she taken the time to read her Bible while she had the chance? And now the opportunity to read in private was forever lost to her.

She knelt by her trunk and retrieved the rarely read leather-bound book—tossed in by thoughtless Marie.

She crept into her bed and opened it in the middle.

She gently stroked the words she knew were there.

Page after page, she stroked, willing the words to come to her until she was too drowsy to think.

She closed the book and held it tightly to her chest and snuggled deep beneath her blankets. Words did finally come. Long ago memorized. Childhood recollections. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...”

She paused. Wait...there was more

“Thy will be done...” on she went, careful with each word—so often glossed over in unthinking rote.

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those...” She paused again.

That pressing pain. She must forgive them of the resentment living within her, eating away at her joy.

She held her hands out as though she carried the ugly weight.

“I have to give it to You, I don’t know how to forgive.

It’s too much. It’s too much.” Agonized whispers lifted.

“Deliver us from evil”— deliver me from evil ... I am sorry...

Daniel’s gentle touch came to her again, his words. You are very much loved... The idea seemed impossible.

DANIEL PET CAT, THINKING of the position he’d put himself in.

He hadn’t well and truly kissed her—just, well, gently so.

He rubbed his chin. He’d been thinking of how much love Clara needed.

Deserved. He supposed he ought to feel ashamed.

He couldn’t find a good reason to berate himself, however.

But if Mrs. Ramshaw found out, would she give him the boot?

“Lord? What do you think?” Oh, for the freedom to love this woman to goodness. He took out his old, worn list. “ Love your neighbor as yourself...”

He couldn’t stop thinking about her, praying for her. Wishing for another moment to embrace her soon. Would she want him? Lord ?

She hadn’t pushed him away. Anticipation tugged at his heart.

His life would take a busy turn over the next few weeks, as Christmas approached. He’d already been invited to three dinners and a formal party. Time for more healing,

hoping...and maybe even happiness.

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Clara pushed down cookie dough with a rolling pin, relishing the scent of sweet cinnamon. She rubbed her hands across the smooth surface. “Hand me a cookie cutter, Jenny.”

“Yes, Miz Clara.”

She scoped the shape with her fingers. A star, six points.

“You made that dough turn out right fine.”

“I did no such thing, though it is good of you to let me help.”

“I ain’t yo master, Miz Clara. You do as you wish.”

“Not really, but I won’t argue with you.” She paused. “Jenny, do you like working for Father and Mother?”

“I never give it no thought.”

“Don’t you? Where did they get you?”

“At the auction, when your mamma was a bride.”

“I’m glad you were chosen.”

“The Stanton farm be a far better place than the last.”

Clara wondered at those words, after all she'd seen—and heard—of Father...

She pressed the cookie cutter into the dough and finger-measured each cut. “Where did you grow up?”

“Here and there.”

“I meant to ask, where did your parents live?”

“I was took from the leg of my mamma when I was seven. Don't know where she be or where we lived.”

Clara paused. Sold away from her mother at such a tender age .

“You done good, now let me get those in the oven.”

“Are you happy here, Jenny?”

“I be happy when Morrie survives this child-bearin'.”

“Morrie? Are you here?”

“She upstairs, cleanin'.”

She dared a question. “Did my father...ever...”

“Miz Clara, I gots to go get that chicken afore it's too late.”

Clara wiped her hands on her apron. Weeks had passed. Reverend Merrick only made brief appearances, but Francine kept her promise to teach her to knit, though Clara was suspicious. How much did her brother share of their discussions?

She tossed her apron aside and stepped twenty-two slow paces to the parlor. Question after question swirled in her mind.

Father still had not responded. Not a single word. She grew sick at her stomach. Did you really do those things? I can't bear it. I just can't bear it. I thought being blind was bad, but this! This is far worse!

If he was guilty, then she never wanted to see him again.

Or be near him. Ever. In any way. They'd never been very close—but as a child she'd savored his doting, his gentle pats on her head.

Now, his misdeeds assaulted her thoughts, she gave it up to God—what else might she do?

She couldn't carry the nasty truth alone.

Neither could she bear to be in Morrie's presence—the quiet girl who carried Clara's brother or sister. Silence surrounded her like fog. Clara never knew if she was in the room, so soft was her tread. What did she do with the hurt? How did she step through each dark day?

Clara's eyes stung. Never had she cried over a slave.

She touched the points on the edible Star-of-David.

The children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt.

God sent Moses. And they were free. Images of a child's picture Bible floated through her memory.

..a baby in a basket...Egypt overcome by the plagues.

..the Red Sea spilt open, Moses' staff raised toward heaven.

Did every slave long to be free? Clara certainly longed to escape .

Mrs. Ramshaw answered a knock at the door and came back bearing a basket of fruit from Dr. Rosenthal.

“Morrie needs some of this for the baby,” Mrs. Ramshaw said.

“Yes, of course. Take it all, if you wish.”

“Here is an orange, my dear. It is the brightest orange I have seen in a year.” The cool fruit had been pushed into her hands and Clara held it as if sunshine. She lifted it to her nose. The fresh, citrus scent mixed with baking cookies. “Smells like Christmas.”

“We shall have a regular party if everyone is well enough. Reverend Merrick and Francine will be joining us, of course.” Her words carried a wisp of joy.

Clara plunged a fingernail into her orange and juice sprayed across her lips. If joy had a scent...

Little by little, her inner naggings pulsed into fear.

Choices and consequences. No matter which way she turned, someone would get hurt.

Some sort of sacrifice was involved. If she left them cold, they'd be hurt—frightened.

And focus on finding her. She had no protector out there.

Her protectors were here. In Mrs. Ramshaw and Daniel.

The only solid option was to stay, blindly obedient to Mrs. Ramshaw. But what had Daniel said about the difference between obedience and compliance?

“What does the doctor’s message say?”

“Yuletide greetings and hopes you are still considering his offer. Posh.” The woman’s opinion was clear.

Clara dropped a peeling on the table. “It isn’t posh if the surgery works.” She considered an idea. “May I travel to Louisville and visit his office, at least? Learn more information about it...then perhaps later...”

Hands dropped about her shoulders in a quiet, thoughtful hug. “I see no reason why not, if you’re only asking questions.”

“Thank you.”

CHRISTMAS DAY DAWNED . At least she supposed it did. Was the sun pale or was the sky lit up with red glory? Snow had crept through her boot, leaving her toes wiggling wet within her stockings. She inhaled the cold air and rubbed gloved hands together.

Every time she left the house, she felt as if she were a clown with a board and barrel, everyone watching her to see which way she might fall and embarrass herself. Why did it matter to them? More importantly, should it matter to her?

Mrs. Ramshaw took her arm. “The Christmas service is my favorite.”

Clara nodded. This service had been a duty before her family could exchange gifts. A

good kind of duty. She had always liked the story of the baby king...the wise men...

Wonderful smells filled the air as they walked toward the church. Her stomach rumbled. They had eaten only oatmeal with the high expectation of fabulous food later. Jenny sang loudly from the kitchen that morning—as she had all the years on the Stanton farm. Even Morrie hummed along.

Morrie...thoughts of the slim, dark girl vaguely filled her mind.

She had never paid much attention to her.

Clara adequately filled the position of eldest daughter, trained to flatter society.

And ride horses well. Morrie also had a job to do, but no fancy tea cakes or new gowns to lighten the load.

Oh, Mrs. Ramshaw, Reverend Merrick. If my life wasn't already changed enough...my beliefs about everything are swirling in a vortex!

Hands pressed into hers in greeting, hushed “Merry Christmases” floated around the church. The organ softly played What Child is This? as she and Mrs. Ramshaw found their pew.

What were the words? She wished she'd memorized more. Carefully she listened.

Reverend Merrick preached the story in gritty detail, nothing of the fanciful fairy tale she'd always known. How often the story stopped at singing angels. He spoke of a people, under oppression, a family, on the run.

Her heart thumped. This was real to him.

The love of a God who would send a baby.

..born to heal, born to die? Unfathomable.

His love, she understood even less. Yet it filled a hungry place within her.

Her eyes suddenly opened even as she gripped the binding of a Bible she couldn't read.

He'd also been born to live. So that the glory of God may be made manifest. Whatever the cost to Him. ..

“WAIT RIGHT HERE, PLEASE .” Daniel's hand brushed her shoulder as she sat useless by the fire. Mrs. Ramshaw and Francine were completing the feast. “The kitchen could be a dangerous place for the likes of you, dear.”

Honestly, when she could see she didn't know how to cook.

Jenny always took care of that. Took care of most things.

Daniel rustled by the front door and returned.

He'd been so kind after her terrible offer.

He lived out forgiveness and gave her hope when she'd been on the brink of falling into a deeper darkness.

Her cheeks warmed at his nearness. Christian had kissed her many times, but the one, soft caress Daniel had left on her lips had made her feel cherished. He probably lived with the regret and she couldn't blame him. She'd not hold him to any obligation. No matter how her heart might wish it.

“What did you think of my sermon?”

“You might better ask me how I felt about your sermon. I’m not sure that my thinking is what it ought to be.”

His laugh was warm and low. “Okay, then. How did you feel about it?”

She rubbed her hand across her empty engagement finger. Strange, how it no longer hurt to feel the empty space. “I felt...” At a loss for words, she reached deep for something real to say. “I...” Words caught in her throat. “I never felt the pain of Christmas before now.”

“Ah.” She heard his expectant silence.

“Nor the goodness that came from the pain either. I felt as though awakened from a dream. For the first time, these stories, these beliefs I’m supposed to have, mean something.

” She pulled her Bible from her lap and held it up.

“Like a sunrise, I can’t see these words for myself anymore. But I long for them.” Her voice broke.

“Clara.” He wiped a tear away from her face with the back of his hand. “Your feelings are the most beautiful I’ve ever heard about any of my sermons. If only others might feel what you do.”

“Others can see. How much I miss!”

“Yet they can’t begin to see what you’ve glimpsed.”

What did he mean? Laughter echoed from the kitchen to the dining table. Joy hovered near.

“Hold out your hands, I’ve a present for you.”

“Reverend...” With a strange hope, she set her Bible aside—ready. A length, solid and thin weighed in her hands. She felt the satin-smooth wood, and the intricate carving at the top of the walking stick.

“I took the liberty of making this for you, after the old one met its end.”

“You made this?” She couldn’t keep from smiling.

“I hiked into the woods until I found the right branch and yes, I made this especially for you.”

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She rubbed her hands down its length, her fingers lingering on the delicate vines trailing around the top. This man—so unusual, so kind. “Thank you. I don’t deserve such a gift.”

“Are gifts ever about deserving them?”

She shook her head. “I suppose they aren’t.” She stood and tested the stick against the floor. Perfect. As though he’d considered her height—the size of her hands. Unlike the bulky, silver-topped cane Father had purchased. This one had been made on purpose. Only for her.

“I wish I could see you. I wish you’d arrived before my accident so that I might have some point of reference.”

“Didn’t Mary Winters provide sufficient description?”

“How did you—?”

“Never mind. I was in the wrong place, wrong time.”

Warmth filled her cheeks. “Did they exaggerate and you’ve blonde hair all this time?”

“Not at all. Black as coal, as advertised.”

Her face flushed warm, and hated that he could see her reaction. Maybe, though, he’d let her see him, the only way she knew how. “Dr. Rosenthal showed me how to see

people with my hands,” she swallowed, “I’m terrified to try.”

He stood before her, set the cane aside, then held her hands. “You don’t have to be afraid,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? Let me help you.”

She hesitated, but he lifted her fingers to the crown of his head and guided her along the landscape of his face.

Her heart thudded as they moved down his cheek bones, across his nose, and found the shape of his lips.

Her breath caught as he held her fingers and kissed them as gently as before.

She stilled as he moved her hands down his clean-shaven chin, and then, trapped them between his own.

She tipped her head, but darkness swam. She didn’t want to let go.

His warm hands, his presence had come to mean so much to her.

His breath flowed across her face as he released her and then cupped her jaw.

This kiss, so soft, flooded her being. Could he love such a broken woman?

Cast off by everyone who mattered? Her hands slid atop his chest and rested there, he moved away. “Clara,” he whispered, “I—”

Mrs. Ramshaw's voice echoed in the hall. "The feast is ready! "

Daniel released her. She didn't want that. She wanted to be held, and held forever. If she had to endure darkness, then maybe she could survive knowing he stood at her side.

He cleared his throat and placed her hand in the crook of his arm.

DANIEL BIT THE INSIDE of his cheek. He felt like a naughty schoolboy.

"In here. I want to talk to you." Mrs. Ramshaw shut the door firmly, a grim expression he'd come to know sent a foreboding down to his toes.

She threw her right hand across her bosom and tossed her glance to the ceiling as though in a drama.

"That was the most romantic conversation I've ever been privileged to overhear.

.." she coughed, "and oversee." She looked at him with a wrinkled grin and shimmering eyes.

"I knew you'd be the man for our Clara." She rubbed her hands together with expectation. "The moment I saw you, I knew."

Daniel swallowed at a lump in his throat. Had he heard her correctly? "Mrs. Ramshaw, I didn't know—I—" Should he apologize? With a sickening realization, he'd actually done what Effie had accused him of. Only this time, his actions were true. Not some sopping gossip.

Mrs. Ramshaw's face turned dead serious. "You will do right by Clara."

He nodded. “I plan to.”

“I don’t think you understand,” she enunciated his name, each syllable crisp and direct, “Reverend Daniel Merrick.” Her mouth twitched.

“Mrs. Ramshaw, I’ll have you know that I’ve never embraced another woman before in my life. I swear it.” A trickle of sweat slipped down his temple .

“Why would you have to swear such a thing?”

“Because Clara is important to me.”

“Why?”

“She...blast it all, I can’t think straight. She just is, you ought to understand.”

“She’s lost too much, Daniel. Far too much. I don’t think she could endure losing you too. After what I saw before our feast, I think you better get your ducks in a row.”

He hadn’t considered the change in stations—what caring for her on a daily basis might be like.

“You should also understand that I own a shotgun and know how to use it.”

“Mrs. Ramshaw, I was nearly forced to marry a twit of a girl by the point of a shotgun because she threw herself at me. The scandal damaged my career, my family’s position in society,” he threw up a hand in exasperation, “and Francine, she...”

Mrs. Ramshaw pointed her gnarled finger at him. “Don’t touch Clara again until you’ve placed a ring on her finger.”

She was right. “Yes ma’am.” A serious reminder.

Compassion swept away her stern expression. “I was young once too. I know what I’m asking you. I watch over her as if she were my own daughter. I see how it is. Clara is a deeply wounded soul. Wait for her to heal a little more. Let her faith grow stronger.”

He looked at his hands that had guided Clara’s down his face, to see him. “To back away so coldly now will hurt her more.” And yet...

Mrs. Ramshaw struggled. “Save your lips for preaching, Daniel. That is all I ask.”

He grinned like a fool. Couldn’t help it.

The old woman pulled him into an affectionate hug. “Now. We have other business to discuss.”

Her plans to send Morrie north might well be the end of any courtship, if he were caught in the middle of it .

Before he took his leave, he squeezed Clara’s hand as he used to do. Spoke through his fingertips. What was she thinking? Would she have him if he offered?

CLARA LAY ON HER BED dreaming of Daniel’s kiss.

She’d marry him on the spot if allowed. If he asked.

But she wasn’t good enough for him—not nearly.

All she’d ever known, all she ever did were the results of her parent’s opulent lifestyle.

Before the accident, she'd been happy enough.

Christian had asked for her hand. She felt pride in the beauty of her youth, the privilege of her station.

The heady fulfillment of being wanted by a man who professed nothing but love to her.

They'd talked of the world beyond them. Enjoyed intelligent conversations about literature and politics.

He seemed the perfect candidate. His gallantry had been unmatched.

His desires, though, were ultimately entirely dependent on her wholeness.

Her beauty with nothing lacking. And of course her weighty dowry.

Clara scrunched her nose. Her family was rich. Daniel would never require a piece of her heritage to call her wife. No one should ever have to be tempted by dollar signs to marry.

How had she not seen past this? She'd accused her sisters too often for falling for young men without knowing their character. Now Lucy was set to marry such a man.

If only there was a way to stop her. Not for her sake, but Lucy's. Her sister deserved true love. Not Mr. Grant. Not a man whose promises blew away like dust.

Maybe Francine would help her write a letter. Maybe, if she convinced Lucy, she'd save her future. Convince her of Christian's inconstancy.

Clara slipped beside the window and pressed her face to the cool glass, remembering

the stars. How they gleamed at night. If her eyes were healed one day, she'd live a very different life than before. If she could see, she'd never go back to being the woman she'd been. Never.

Strange, how her worst moment had turned her life around on a dime. Each and every desire revolved around a new purpose—one she didn't fully understand. Not yet.

DANIEL THREW ANOTHER log on the kitchen fire while Francine stirred their Christmas cider, a recipe handed down through generations.

They'd never celebrated without the cider—in truth, they'd never celebrated away from Mother and the boys.

He missed their rambunctious antics and helping Mother with their Christmas surprises.

Francine handed him a steaming cup. "Thank you, dearest sister of mine. I don't deserve you."

"No, you certainly don't." She grinned and sat down at the long kitchen table.

"I've something to confess."

Her tone was teasing. "I'm all ears." She sipped from her cup.

Did he dare tell her? Even when his feelings were still so new? He must. "I will ask for Clara's hand soon."

She sputtered cider, choking on his words. "What?"

"I plan to marry Clara." Saying it out loud made it seem real, to the depths of his

being. Every time he was near her, she fit into his heart like she was always meant to be there—no matter her wounds or blindness.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Francine blinked in the candlelight as though he’d grown an extra head.

“No joke, Francine.” He sipped his cider. “It’s like God put her here.” He pressed a hand to his heart. “And I can’t help but love her. I really can’t.”

“I admit, she is very beautiful, Daniel, but she’s also blind as a bat.

Are you sure your ministry can withstand such a.

..substantial disability? A man of your caliber will be back in a higher pulpit soon.

I’d hate to see you shackled by a woman who’d struggle to keep up.

” She put her hands on her hips. “Or worse yet—hold you back.”

Daniel set his cup on the table. “Shackled? A higher pulpit, Francine? Are some pulpits more worthy than others? More esteemed?”

“You know they are.”

Daniel stood and crossed his arms. “No. They aren’t. The most important pulpit is the one God bids me preach from, no matter the numbers or level of society.”

“You’ve fallen far. If you keep this attitude, then you’ll live in poverty. Marry the girl, children will arrive soon. Do you make enough to provide for a brood of them?”

Daniel swallowed. He had savings. Money she knew nothing about. They’d be alright

for a few years. “God provides and I am not afraid.” Did Francine not hear what he’d said? “God put her on my heart. I know He did. Beyond a shadow of a doubt. You cannot change that.”

“She comes from wealth, I hear. Odd that she should be placed with Mrs. Ramshaw.”

“I call it providential.”

“Will you be allowed to marry her?”

Daniel closed his eyes briefly. “I must be.”

“I suppose there would be a dowry—don’t look at me like that. Surely you thought of it too.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Either way, you’ll need consent. If she’s agreeable, of course. Has she agreed?”

“I haven’t asked. She needs time.”

Francine puffed with irritation. “If she isn’t selfish, she’ll reject you.”

“You wound me. How can you behave this way? Don’t you care about my feelings?”

Francine bit her lip and set her cup on the table.

“What do you have against her?”

“Nothing. I feel as though I could love her as my own sister.”

“Then why this fuss?”

“Love can be so blinding—and exacting. I don’t want to see you caught in a trap again.” Her voice caught. “Or rejected either.”

He sat on the opposite bench and spread his hands before her. “What, dear sister, do you know of love?”

She broke into a sob and bent her head to her arms.

Suddenly he saw. “You’ve been in love. With someone you thought—Francine. Did a man do you a wrong turn?”

“No. It wasn’t like that. He never knew I cared.” She gulped, “Mr. Crawley scared them away. He behaved as my suitor. And Edward, he...”

“Edward? Edward Harrington?”

She blushed.

“Just as well.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“He thought Mr. Crawley and I were engaged.”

Daniel understood his sister’s need to flee New York. He’d performed Edward’s marriage before he’d left. “Keep hoping and praying, Francine, for the love of your life. God knows who he is meant to be. Meanwhile, pray for me too, as I sort out my future.”

Francine looked at him with such doleful eyes. “I suppose you’ll need a ring.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

No word came from Father. Clara waited through the New Year, and a bitter cold January. Even the letter Francine had penned on her behalf had been ignored. She'd begged Lucy against the marriage. To no avail.

Never had she spent so much time apart from her family. Never did she think she might endure blindness even this long. But she did and would continue to do so.

She pondered how white the fields must be. In such snow the townsfolk were themselves blinded by the sun's reflection against stark whiteness of winter. She'd hated the sensation, but still, she longed even for that experience.

She kept warm enough, nearly always perched by the fire knitting.

At least an hour every day, Francine sat with her, showing her new tricks with the needles or just keeping her company.

For weeks, Clara's knitting lay in knots and messes.

Her first scarf was riddled with missed stitches and extra holes.

Francine stopped reading her book and grew quiet. "Morrie grows great with child."

"Does she?"

"In a matter of weeks, she will give birth."

Clara set her knitting in her lap. She'd been as quiet as the winter.

She kept her peace—still uncertain of her duty.

The fact that she'd bargained Morrie's life still nagged at her.

Father kept tabs on his property if not his daughter.

Unbidden, the overseer had dropped in a few days ago to make sure Jenny and Morrie were in place.

Where they belonged. Later, Mrs. Ramshaw told her that the girl's pregnancy was carefully hidden by the tall kitchen worktable.

Law itself would keep everything in balance.

She needn't interfere. And if Morrie managed to escape, it served her family right to lose property.

If Clara hadn't mattered to them then why should Morrie?

These thoughts left her unsettled. She'd begun to see Morrie as more than property. Another wounded soul.

Francine interrupted her thoughts. "I believe we should make a few things for the baby."

"Yes. A gift might cheer her." And assuage the depth of guilt that lay at her family's door? "Do you believe as your brother? That such people deserve equality?"

"Yes, I do."

"He doesn't preach this from the pulpit as I thought he might."

“Doing so may cause more damage than good. People rarely practice what the preacher preaches.”

“If it is from God, then why shouldn’t they?”

“They must study the Word for themselves. Prove my brother’s sermons true. Commit it to prayer. After all, Daniel is only human. Just like you.”

A deep laugh slipped in with the man himself. “Francine seems convinced I evolved from an ape like Charles Darwin claims.”

“Daniel!” Francine scolded. “Announce yourself next time. You scared the dickens out of me.”

Clara smiled. She’d felt the draft, heard the kitchen door click. Knew his step even before Francine sensed him.

“More snow is on the way. We need to get supplies and get home,” Daniel said. “And how is Miss Stanton on this frigid day?”

She held up the knitting so he could see. “I am a pitiful excuse for a knitter. At least it is something to do. ”

Daniel had kept a distance since Christmas, when he’d so tenderly held her. Kissed her. She couldn’t blame him. Who wanted a blind woman? He’d had a weak moment, and she’d fallen fast. A fool once is a fool twice. Francine had taken his place reading aloud.

“It’s charming. Lots of character,” Daniel said.

A sweet effort...

“I tried to tell her the same thing. We are going to make something for Morrie next week.”

“Ah. Good. Clara, I almost forgot. My step father sent this in hopes that you will be able to read.”

“You mean, for Francine to read aloud?”

“No, actually, it is for you—to read.” Amusement tinged his voice. Why did he jest about such a matter?

She set down her knitting and received a thick stack of paper. Clara took the cards and ran her hands over them, a seeming mishmash of bumps. “I don’t understand.”

“Time for you to relearn your alphabet. Do you feel the dots? Each dot or group of dots represents a letter. Entire books have been copied in this manner so that the blind may read for themselves.”

“I’ve never heard of this. Daniel, I hope you are not playing a trick on me, I thought you to be honest at least.”

“At least?”

Clara licked her lips. She wished he would reach out to her again. With intention. Let her know he cared as much as he seemed to at Christmas. Silly fool, she was. “This is very good of you. Which is the first card?”

“The one with the missing corner.” She felt for the “A”.

Francine and Reverend Merrick left Clara eagerly tracing the dots, over and over. Words she might feel, a word quietly spoken, a story beneath her fingers. She sat

there for over an hour before she set them aside and heard Morrie reading for Mrs. Ramshaw .

Timid and stuttering, she read aloud to her teacher's encouragements. "G-od h-ath n-ot g-given us a s-pir it of f-ear..." Clara finished the sentence in a soft whisper, "but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind..."

She rubbed at her eyes, if only the rubbing gave way to sight.

It did not. Anxiety pressed in, the familiar desperation.

"A sound mind, Lord. Give me a sound mind..." She leaned back in her chair and lifted her face to the ceiling she couldn't see.

How does one accept an ongoing plight? Accept and not fight it anymore?

Morrie's and Mrs. Ramshaw's voices carried another verse from the kitchen, this time in unison.

"Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; who has saved us, and called us with an holy calling..."

Maybe this suffering wasn't the end of the story.

Her father may yet agree to the surgery.

He certainly could afford it. She rubbed her finger tips over the bumpy words she needed to learn.

Why did Dr. Rosenthal not tell her of this?

Curious. He of all people ought to have.

Enough waiting. She needed to talk to him.

As soon as the snowstorm blew over, she would board the train to Louisville.

She needed answers.

IT WAS NEARLY TIME .

Her soul had eased open, this was easy to see.

He'd watched her from his pulpit on Sunday's past, how she inclined her ear to the words he'd prayerfully put together.

To the Scripture she could no longer see for herself.

Her expression had turned from pained to sober over the last few months. Then, from sober to open wanting.

Finally, her sorrow was lifting. She wanted more out of life. The better kind of more.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

Mrs. Ramshaw pulled Clara along the train and into a private car. “Money your father left for any occasion I deemed necessary. Privacy comes at a premium.” She gently pushed Clara into a velvet-covered seat and sat beside her. Daniel stepped through, his knees brushing her skirts.

Each time he came near, she felt his warmth and thought of Christmas. Downright distracting, this man. Had she dreamt up their embrace? Did he still care?

“We should be there in three hours or so,” he said.

Three long hours.

Mrs. Ramshaw patted her hand. “Maybe try to knit something while we ride so it’s not a complete waste of your time.” She rummaged in a bag for a set of needles and a ball of yarn.

Clara gripped them in her gloved hands. If only Father had written before now. Maybe he had done so—maybe Dr. Rosenthal had permission for the surgery in his hands? In that case, would she follow through? Dear Lord, do I dare?

The train seem to say, “Rosenthal, Rosenthal, Rosenthal...” in a steady push towards her freedom.

In all honesty, Clara didn’t want to face him. Not really. Or did she? Did he really expect her eyes to be cured? No, the man was fine. The impossibility of the situation is what she didn’t want to face.

A light snore lifted by her side.

She turned to Daniel. "Is she asleep? "

"Out like a light." She felt him lean close. "Worried about the meeting?"

"Truthfully, yes."

Clara felt his hands lifting the tangled yarn and needles out of her own and settled them within reach. "How do you get on with the Braille book?"

"Splendidly." Her voice caught, emotion erupted unexpectedly. "This is ridiculous." She brought her hand to her forehead. "Take me home, Reverend."

"We can't exactly ask the train to stop. You don't want to talk to him anymore?"

"No. Gracious, what's wrong with me?"

"But he is expecting us. Shall we send a note when we arrive? I'm afraid it may be too late to do so."

"Alright. We'll go see him." She leaned back in her seat.

"When we get to Louisville, let us dine at the hotel and miss the meeting completely." Daniel sounded like he was crumpling paper of some sort. Crunching.

"Are you eating?"

"Roasted pecans. Want some?"

"No."

“Clara? You have the ability to be as free as I am. Jail walls do not surround you.” He chewed some more nuts. “Life’s doors will be opened to you.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I want to see Dr. Rosenthal.”

“I know.”

“And how did you know that?”

His laugh rumbled deep. “Women are always fickle.”

“Not all of us. I’ve experienced a few too many men who take what they don’t intend to keep.

” She should have kept her mouth shut. She didn’t blame him—she’d told herself this time and time again.

He didn’t make promises only to break them.

He didn’t ask for her hand in marriage and then run off with her sister. He’d been nothing but kind.

In a moment, her hand was in his. “Clara.” He removed her glove, then took her other hand and removed the other one.

Skin against skin. He rubbed his fingers across the tops and caressed her palms, then securely enveloped both of her hands between his.

He spoke quietly. “Don’t worry. I intend to keep what I have taken. ”

AN HOUR LATER THEY’D disembarked and hired a cab to the address. Daniel felt

Clara trembling on his arm. Such excitement. Would it help or hurt her? Mrs. Ramshaw took her free hand. "Come now. Better get this over with."

A police patrol wagon led by two bored horses parked in front of the tall brick building. Crime? The area looked shining new. As busy as the city he'd left behind.

They climbed the steep set of steps to the door and halted. Something felt wrong. He leaned into the waiting area and a stench met his nose. He shut the door quickly. "Mrs. Ramshaw. Clara, wait here while I talk to the doctor first. I'll be right back."

He disengaged Clara's grasp and stepped in. The putrid smell! Lamps were lit and voices grew from the inner rooms. Two men stepped out from the office. Policemen.

"One of them jerked a thumb behind him." I don't think you want to end up like that guy. Better find yourself a new doc. This one's in the slammer. The noose is next."

"What do you mean? What has happened?"

"That doctor is no physician. He's a quack. I've never seen the like. The guy's been lining up unsuspecting people. Making big promises. A new surgery to restore their vision. This is the third death this week. "

The door opened and Clara and Mrs. Ramshaw stepped through. "It's too cold outside."

"You here to see Doctor Rosenthal?"

Clara bent her head in a nod and lifted a handkerchief from her sleeve.

"Well, Mister, she's better blind than dead."

“What’s going on here?” Mrs. Ramshaw broke in.

“Rosenthal’s a fraud. ‘Sall you need to know.”

“Daniel?” Clara queried.

“Outside—let’s get some fresh air.”

He led them down the steps to a nearby bench, his stomach hijacked by nausea. How close Clara had been to being under his hands! Thank God Clara’s father had never responded to their queries. Thank God . What could he say but the truth of the matter? Yet again, God protected her.

Mrs. Ramshaw held on to Clara like she might sink off the bench. Her lips were pursed. “What, in Heaven’s name, is going on?”

“His surgeries helped a few people to their deaths. He is in jail, I’m afraid.”

Clara blanched, confusion spreading across those staring eyes of hers.

“A quack? How absolutely impossible.” Mrs. Ramshaw’s voice quivered. “I’d have never forgiven myself. Never.”

Clara gripped Daniel’s hand and Ramshaw’s arm came around her shoulders. “Lord, Lord. Thank you for keeping our Clara safe. Oh dear, dear Lord.” The woman’s prayer slipped between them like glue.

Why would the man choose her life to play games with? Was it the money she’d be able to pay? Deathly thoughts. What might have happened had she gone under his knife ?

One of the police men exited the office and approached them. “If you don’t mind, would you three be willing to give a statement as to your dealings with Dr. Rosenthal?”

Clara lifted her chin and told him what she knew.

She’d had so much hope. He’d tried to entice her into a surgery that could have killed her. Her broken desperation had transformed her into a woman he was beginning to love to the depths of his being. Indeed, she’d gained much. But what damage would this new loss cause?

AFTER A FEW HOURS ABOARD the train, Clara had never been happier to get off and stretch. Daniel had procured a table at a nearby inn, where they’d dined in silence before the never-ending return journey.

She couldn’t explain her feelings. They’d all remained quiet the rest of the way home—her mind receding into itself, nestling within her newly forming thoughts.

That Dr. Rosenthal was such a brute had been a shock.

A man lay murdered in the very room where he’d examined her last autumn?

The idea stole her breath. Surprisingly, the knowledge that there’d be no surgery—was no treatment—to restore her sight hadn’t been the blow she’d expected.

She knew that Mrs. Ramshaw and Daniel were worried. She hadn’t melted into a pool of tears or come up with a new, outrageous threat. No more bargaining to get her way. Her desperation had been tempered by love. Daniel’s and Mrs. Ramshaw’s.

They’d cared for her like family. They carried her heart firmly, but gently.

Unmovable, no matter what Clara said or did.

Mrs. Ramshaw couldn't be put off from caring about her.

For her. This time, it didn't feel as if the old woman wanted to control her destiny.

She wanted to keep her safe. Unlike her parents.

..the ones she should have been able to trust with every inch of her life .

And Daniel, God knew she didn't deserve him. Not with her failings and what she tried to do. How could they forgive so freely? She asked herself these questions, but knew the answer in its purest form.

Jesus.

Only Jesus.

Jenny bustled about her, serving tea and hot soup. The sounds around the kitchen were as familiar as they were comforting. The creak of the stove door, a splash of water, a gentle hum...

Clara breathed in the fragrant soup, a family recipe. Except this kitchen felt more like home than any other.

She tore into her hot yeast roll and generously buttered it.

Life...life was here and now. God had seen fit to put her where she'd experience a taste beyond what she'd always known.

More than a taste—she lifted her spoon to her mouth and savored the herbed

broth—life was a whole new pot of soup.

She laughed at her own attempts at sorting out her feelings.

Blinded though she was, she felt that she could see. Finally.

Daniel burst through the kitchen door, allowing in a cold wake of frigid air. He'd left not twenty minutes prior. "Have you seen the paper?"

A crackle met her ears as he spread it wide on the table. Mrs. Ramshaw mumbled the text as she read. "...caught and killed. Those who aided or abetted were to be..."

She didn't finish. Daniel sounded as though he'd raced up the hill from his parsonage. Jenny stopped humming. Mrs. Ramshaw groaned. "Dear God."

Clara put her spoon into her bowl. "What happened?"

Mrs. Ramshaw patted her hand. "We'll have this discussion another time. Daniel, go home. Get some rest. We'll think straight come morning."

"Mrs. Ramshaw? "

"Don't let your soup grow cold, dear."

Daniel's hand briefly rested on her shoulder. "Goodnight, Clara." He sounded tired. Deflated. "Good night, Mrs. Ramshaw. You're right. We'll think better after a good rest."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:55 am

Clara didn't hear about the latest news that had Mrs. Ramshaw and Daniel in a mild panic. For days, he'd stayed away, no doubt catching up on his duties. Mrs. Ramshaw had a few visitors while she'd stayed in her comfortable corner, knitting and thinking.

Word finally came that her family would return by springtime—for Lucy's wedding. She needed to be ready. Someone knocked on the door. Jenny answered before Mrs. Ramshaw had a chance.

"Massah." Jenny's tone turned tight. Clara heard the fear.

Father? Clara trembled and stood, her ball of yarn rolled away.

Mrs. Ramshaw flew into the foyer. "What is it, Dawes?"

Clara grew weak in the knees. Ah. Only Dawes. The apprentice overseer.

"Mr. Stanton asked me to give you this. For Miss Clara's surgery, he said. Here's a letter that come along with it. For the miss."

"Thank you, Dawes."

"Ma'am."

The door closed. "Well, Clara. It's finally happened. I hold in my hands a vast sum of money for your surgery. What do you think of that?"

Mrs. Ramshaw pressed two envelopes into her hands, one thick with bills, the other,

naught but a thin slip of a message. Both made her cringe .

“I have escaped, by the skin of my teeth. Will you put the money away for the time being?” Clara handed the bills back to her.

“Sure thing, girly. It’ll be in a jar beneath your bed, if that sounds alright?”

“If that’s where you think it would be safe.”

She marched off with the money that would have cost her life.

She took a deep breath and ran her hands across the sealed letter from Father.

Her stomach clenched with sorrow. One’s father ought to be good, an example.

Could a man like Father ever repent for his crime?

Could he yet become good? In her mind, his sins forever marred him.

One question pricked like an unwanted thorn. Could she forgive him? Could Morrie?
The thoughts twisted her morning’s peace with pain.

She set the letter on the table and wished never to see him again.

DANIEL SAT AROUND A table with three aging women and two men.

The single candle in the center of the table cast shifting shadows across their faces.

A youthful spark emanated from their eyes.

They’d done difficult things before. Fought and won against an unforgiving land.

They hadn't flinched when he showed them the news article. Not a single one batted an eye.

"You mean to tell me," Daniel swallowed, "that you've never helped a slave to safety? That this is your very first attempt on the Underground Railroad?" How could these frail old folks hope to succeed?

One of the men shook his head. "I gave a slave family shelter for the night, five years back."

"And you have no other contacts except for each other?" The evening was cool, but Daniel began to sweat .

Mrs. Ramshaw grinned. "I prayed about it and knew you'd be our next contact as soon as I saw you."

"But I live here. Don't you need someone who lives outside of the community?" He looked each of them in the face. Good hearts bent on doing good deeds. Dangerous actions with irreparable consequences.

"Your family lives in New York, do they not?" Mrs. Ramshaw shook her head until her day cap strings wiggled beneath her chin.

Daniel's stomach sank. Like a steamship on the river, gurgling to its death. The second time she hinted of using his family. "I absolutely cannot involve them. You must understand, if I decide to help, I will not put my family's lives on the line."

"Morrie can't stay. You know she can't." Mrs. Ramshaw's passionate voice trembled. Her friend wiped away tears.

Daniel ran his hand over the stubble that covered his chin.

The day had worn him down, a sermon had been slow coming, a visit to the sick and dying had left him melancholy.

Francine did her best to cheer him up, but since reading the newspaper the day they'd returned from Louisville. ..More nightmares.

Lord , he prayed, help me ...

Men and women died in the uprising, the shoot-out. The punishments had been dire and immediate. He grimaced. A mad dash to freedom could get them all killed.

Mrs. Ramshaw spoke up. "There is going to be a way to get that child out of here. It's February now, she must leave by March. The Stanton's are set to return by May for that fool wedding of Lucy's."

One of the men spoke up, "God will make a way for her. We will pray—all of us. And know by the end of the week what we are to do, or whom we are to meet."

Daniel looked at him in surprise. Such faith! By the end of the week? Impossible. They weren't prepared. How could they know how to do what none of them had ever done before? And what if they were caught? "Are you ready to pay the penalty for breaking the law?"

Five pairs of eyes unified in an unflinching glare.

The answer was clear.

CLARA EAVESDROPPED , a conundrum filled her ears. None of them knew how to send someone journeying on the Underground Railroad. Hadn't the foggiest what they were doing. Though valiant of heart, they failed to make a plan for one young woman who needed to get away from her home—and her Father.

Clara slipped up the stairs and back into bed as visitors took leave of Mrs. Ramshaw.

Daniel was uncomfortable if not downright scared.

He'd been roped into helping, that much was plain.

She traced the quilt pattern with her fingers, seeking a path, seeking a safe way to freedom.

Knots in the way, at every turn. Knots, carefully planned.

They hadn't asked the right people for help. Kentucky lost a good many slaves to the underground and Northern promises. The Fugitive Slave Act, a bane to those caught. Father hadn't lost any yet. She wished now that he had.

Young Morrie's rounded belly grew greater by the day. Did they really think she should travel so close to giving birth? Either way, her path was littered with obstacles.

Clara propped up and clutched her Bible out of habit. Here were the answers. The answer. It niggled in the back of her mind and wouldn't let go. Somehow, she knew that out of her darkness, another would find freedom.

Her fingers found the leather grain and traced a new path. A story rose from the depths. A captive queen, a daring invitation...

"...for such a time as this..." she whispered.

BY MORNING, CLARA'S idea was ready to burst forth. A plan that released with every breath. If only she'd be brave enough to speak her thoughts aloud. To give them wheels to carry Morrie forward into a new life.

The answer was so simple. So easy, she laughed when she first thought of it. Her cheeks burned. Hadn't he said, "I plan to keep what I have taken?" Her heart thumped against her chest.

Jenny removed her dirty dishes from the table. "You be alright, Miss Clara? You look like your heart done give out."

Clara smiled wide. "I am well. And my heart has never been more alive."

"Your eyes are sparklin'."

She needed to see Daniel. Soon. Could she call upon Francine and wait for him there? Or should she bide her time in the parlor awaiting his return?

She thrummed her fingers on the table and bit her lip. This couldn't wait, not even a moment. Not with Morrie due so soon. Her stomach flopped. What did she have to lose? This time, her bargain would have nothing to do with selfish half-crazed plans.

Clara pushed herself from the table and searched the house for Mrs. Ramshaw, who'd been on her hands and knees scrubbing shoe-molding in the dining room. The sound of splashing water and the scent of evergreen filled the air. She'd never done such a chore, but wouldn't mind trying.

She held the doorway. "Mrs. Ramshaw, I need to speak with Reverend Merrick. It is urgent." She pressed a hand to her stomach. She was really going to do this.

"Sure you don't need the doctor instead, my dear?" A soft rustle swept to her side, the aged hand pressed against her brow. "No fever that I can tell."

"I am well. Nonetheless, I need to speak with him. Now."

“One can’t simply demand a person, Clara. ”

Clara smiled. “You don’t understand. It is urgent, but that doesn’t follow that my issue is dire.” She paused. “Or is it?”

“You speak in riddles, child. The man’s busy. Can’t I help?”

“This is a role only he can fill. Take me to him, Mrs. Ramshaw, or fetch him straightaway. I know you value Morrie—every slave—with the same love you have for me.” Unbidden tears built in her throat. She choked them away. “I know you are trying to help her escape. And I know how this can be done.”

Mrs. Ramshaw released a great breath. “You want to be involved? My dear, think of the consequences.”

“I’ve thought it through. I feel as though God has given me the answer.”

“Good night!” Mrs. Ramshaw put her hands on her arms. “I’ll do as you say, but mind me, Clara. You’ll not compromise yourself and you’ll not carry out any plan without the committee’s agreement.”

She nodded. Minutes later, Daniel came, completely out of breath. “Clara—she said it was urgent. To come to you immediately. Are you well? What has happened?”

“Are we alone?” Her voice shook.

Mrs. Ramshaw shuffled out of the room. Clara heard the door shut.

“Yes. We are now.”

Clara took a deep breath and held her stomach with one hand. Nothing quelled the

swarming butterflies. “You said on the train to Louisville that you intended to keep what you have taken.”

Silence met her ears. He reached out to her and picked up her hand and held it between his. “And so I do.”

She needed to ask, before she committed herself to this idea, this promise. “Do you think you can...perhaps...love me?”

His voice grew hoarse. “I already do. Do you need to hear me say it?” His tone gentled, “I love you, Clara. ”

She opened her mouth to speak—how to tell him about her plan?

“This was so urgent, that you needed to hear? I confess, I’m flattered.” He laughed so softly, she wasn’t sure she could speak.

She shook her head. “I need you to know that I, also, cannot help loving you.”

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His hands cupped her face. “I would kiss you, if Mrs. Ramshaw allowed it.”

“Has she forbidden it?”

He cleared his throat. He tapped the finger that used to bear Christian’s ring. “Until there is a ring on your finger—and I can provide for you.”

“Oh—” Clara paused.

“I do not have near the wealth that your father has—”

“Ill-gotten gain, if you consider slavery a wrong.” She reached for his hand. “I already have everything I need.”

“I bring in a pittance.”

“You’ve brought me more life and wealth than I dreamt was possible. I wonder how I lived before. How I ever claimed to have a life worth living. No. It was a farce of frippery and social expectations without any regard to those we trampled underfoot.”

“This is quite a speech from you.” He traced a finger along her jawline. “Are you, by any chance, asking me to marry you?”

“Yes. I am.” How she wished she could look into his eyes.

His breath blew softly over her face. “Any reason why you are in such a hurry? I planned to do it right, you know.”

“You still can.”

“Speak up, Clara. What’s going on?”

“I overheard your issues—with setting Morrie free. That you don’t have a trustworthy contact yet. And her due in a few weeks, and...”

“What does this have to do with us? ”

She took another steadying breath. With him so near, she had a hard time thinking straight.

“I prayed all night. I believe the answer for her freedom starts here.” She pointed to her heart.

“And here...” she reached out to find his.

He guided her hand to the place where his heart strummed quickly beneath his coat.

“If we marry, I know I may ask Father for Morrie as a wedding gift. He’s said as much many times—that I would have a slave as a wedding gift. As soon as we receive the legal documents, we can give her freedom papers. It will be completely legal and above board. No sneaking around.”

He held her hands by his lips now, listening.

“And then, we can fund her way north by train—not via the underground. Find a safe place for her and the baby...”

He pressed his lips against her knuckles. “I think, my dear,” he murmured, “that you had better marry me. The sooner, the better. How old are you, Clara?”

“Twenty, last week,” she whispered.

“Mmm. You never said a word.”

“Everyone already makes such a fuss over me. I daresay Morrie has never had a birthday celebration. If she must do without, so will I.”

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Unfortunately, the law says we’ll need your father’s consent. Waiting for an answer from him seems to be a difficulty. Did you ever hear back from him about the surgery?”

Clara reached into her apron pocket and pulled out the unopened message. “This came the other day. Along with money for the operation and permission. I haven’t had it read to me yet...”

“May I?”

“Please. Don’t leave anything out. I want to know.”

“I promise.”

Paper crinkled and unfolded. “Here we go:

My dear daughter ,

When we return in the spring, be a good sport about Lucy’s marriage to Christian.

I ask that you remain with Mrs. Ramshaw through the festivities.

Your sister is radiant. Be happy for her, for she plans to care for you as the years wane, if you are yet with us.

” Daniel coughed . “If your surgery is successful, you may court and flirt to your heart’s desire.

For your sake, I pray it works. Your mother thrives in her homeland.

We both expect Alice to be engaged soon.

Your loving Father.

Clara shook her head. “Burn it, will you?”

“With pleasure.”

“I think my family will be glad to be rid of me. I can’t see how Father will have any objection our marriage.”

“In another year, he won’t have a say in it.”

“A year will be too late. What about the baby? And if it is born before I gain her as a wedding gift, Morrie will remain his, the baby will belong to Father. Helping her escape on the underground will be that much harder.”

“God will make a way for Morrie. Clara Stanton, one way or another, for reasons far removed from saving Morrie’s life, we will marry.” He leaned forward and brushed her lips with his. “I insist.”

The door flung open. “I simply cannot wait.” Mrs. Ramshaw’s bright voice penetrated their quiet moment. “What is this urgent business Clara would drag you here to discuss?”

Clara felt movement by her feet. Daniel held her hand. “Dearest Clara, would you do

me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Lord-a-mercy." Mrs. Ramshaw's voice fluttered like Clara's heart.

"I will." Everything above board, with a witness even.

"Wait here, Clara, Mrs. Ramshaw. I will return in under ten minutes."

He flew from her side and Mrs. Ramshaw replaced him. "My goodness, what brought that on?" She patted her hand. "I'm happy for you, dear. So very happy. Don't think you could find a better man."

"I agree." She sat quietly and then, "Mrs. Ramshaw? There's more."

AN HOUR LATER, CLARA sat next to Daniel with his mother's ring on her finger, scarcely believing the words just spoken.

"You mean, we won't have to wait for Father's permission?" Her cheeks burned with the fire of her future.

Mrs. Ramshaw laughed like a young girl. "No siree. I have an authorized document giving me sole authority over matters such as these in the event, pardon me, Clara, but you are so very beautiful, that you should require it. I thought it a good precaution."

"Precaution against?"

"A wild filly. Didn't rightly know what sort of girl you'd be—or that you'd turn out with a heart larger than this land we cherish."

Daniel threaded his fingers with hers. "So, we may marry as soon as may be..." his

voice trailed.

Mrs. Ramshaw poured tea and set Clara's cup to her left. "Second thoughts, Reverend?"

"Never. However, I didn't awake this morning knowing that this beauty would belong to me so soon." He stroked the ring on her finger and sent her pulse racing.

"Clara, dear? We have hasty wedding plans to make."

Mrs. Ramshaw laughed again. "You may kiss her now, Reverend. I won't stop you." As soon as she exited the room, Clara found herself in his arms, his lips on hers, gently exploring a promising future.

His love wiped out any fear over what her father would think. Any fear that he might not—this one last time—cater to her whims by giving her the slave of her own choosing...

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“The documents, as requested.” Mrs. Ramshaw handed Daniel the all-important proof that Mr. and Mrs. Stanton had indeed relinquished rights to their daughter. Surgery, they must grant permission—but marriage? Had they thought so little of Clara? Or her chance at happiness?

He’d never release his daughter in this way. But praise God Mrs. Ramshaw came to her aid. He laughed. They never suspected the old woman capable of upending Clara’s life for the better.

“Now all I need is Francine to cooperate, and we’ll be on our way.”

Mrs. Ramshaw tapped her chin. “After you are married, she must come live here. I’d love the companionship.”

Francine hadn’t celebrated much at the news. She tried to put on a happy front, despite the dire warnings that Clara wouldn’t—couldn’t—make a decent preacher’s wife. She listed her shortcomings again.

“I do like her, Daniel. Very much.” Francine had kissed him on the cheek and wished him well. He could do nothing to tug her out of the depths. Melancholia drowned her joy since she’d arrived. He’d urged her to pray. She assured him she did.

Plans must continue. They would marry within two weeks. Seemed like an eternity. Once the ring was on her finger, he was ready to make his vows. Clara was eager as well, though had grown somewhat timid of late.

Sweet Clara. He’d been so reluctant to help this renegade group of abolitionists.

Worried about his sterling reputation. He wanted nothing to mar his ministry or override his purpose. What happened in New York couldn't happen again.

When Mrs. Ramshaw first approached him, he wanted to forget she ever said the words. Pretend that slavery wasn't a great evil, pretend that the souls of his congregation were all that mattered. That was the truth, he discovered. Their souls did matter and he felt a fool for having been so reticent.

If Clara hadn't made her crazy offer...if her heart hadn't been turned inside out...if... He saw in sequence the beautiful change in his beloved. She'd not only gotten stronger, she'd become fearless. She'd do anything to set Morrie free. If only he'd shown as much pluck from the beginning.

Truth be told, she infused him with energy. Sometimes God's will came upon him in a still, small voice. Other times it crashed down like a rider bounding from her horse.

"Ma'am?" Jenny poked her head in the parlor. Her eyes flashed with concern.

"What is it, Jenny?" Mrs. Ramshaw was already on her feet.

"Morrie be painin'."

"It's too soon—oh dear. Say some prayers, Reverend. Hot water, Jenny."

A moan sank through the floors, mournful and desperate.

Clara filled the doorway. "She needs help! I don't know what to do!"

Daniel gathered her to his side as Jenny and Mrs. Ramshaw rushed upstairs. For hours they sat together, serenaded by Morrie's pain-filled cries. Praying, weeping. Hoping.

Clara murmured into his jacket. “She’s been through too much already. Why this? ”

“I don’t know.” He sensed the growing wave of questions, one led to another, then another. Who had the answers?

How could a good God deliver a sweet woman into the hands of a man who would defile her? How could a good God allow a fifteen-year-old child to become a mother? How, indeed could a good God allow Morrie’s people to be enslaved for so long? Why hadn’t He stopped the horror?

How did one explain to her tender heart that God loved so much that He sent his Son, Who, therefore, sent us? Us ...he pondered. Of course. They were the answer. Good would eventually overpower the evils. It had to. The two couldn’t exist together.

He kissed the top of Clara’s head. “And the Lord God gave to Job twice as much as he had before...” A devastating story with a strangely satisfying conclusion.

Clara snuggled closer—too close for propriety. “If good can come from my blindness—then—” she didn’t finish.

“Yes. Good will come to Morrie.”

“I’m afraid she will die.”

Daniel stroked her back. He feared the same.

“My father—”

“Hush now.”

She pulled away from him. “He’ll be a murderer.”

Daniel shook his head. “Best not to think on it.”

“He should pay for his sin.” Bitterness tainted her words.

Daniel couldn’t disagree. For raping Morrie, and who knows how many other victims, the man should hang. He did deserve it. How painful the knowledge was for Clara! There was nothing left but to pray for his soul.

Like Jonah’s regret, Daniel didn’t always want the guilty to repent and receive the same measure of mercy the faithful enjoyed. He shut his eyes and let his mind drift to the greater story. The greater redemption. Restoration .

Mrs. Ramshaw and Jenny’s voice urged Morrie on. Success was near.

“We can hide the fact that she’s had the baby. You sent the letter to your father?”

She nodded.

“Then we’ll soon be on our way. All of us.

” He helped her to her feet. “Come, I believe Esther is in need of an apple and a gentle touch.” He led her outside where his horse—her horse—stood waiting.

He pulled an apple from the saddle bag and placed it in Clara’s hand.

She held the horse by the bridle and spoke softly to the creature who had unknowingly triggered her downfall.

“I’m glad you aren’t afraid.”

“No—I couldn’t be. Not of Esther.”

“But she ruined your sight...”

Clara squeezed her eyes together and swept her hand down Esther’s long neck.

“Mr. Grant—he rode in front of me as I was poised to jump the fence. He’s to blame.

I was trying to keep up. He circled back and cut me off.

I don’t know why—it all happened so fast. I couldn’t hold on.

” She patted the creature. “It wasn’t her fault. Poor thing.”

So much seemed out of control—but it wasn’t outside the loving direction of the Father. He saw. He knew.

“I’m not sorry it happened, Daniel.”

MRS. RAMSHAW ARRIVED with the news. Her voice quavered as though her own child had died. “He’s in the arms of Jesus.” Sounds of mourning filtered through the floor above.

“How is Morrie?” Daniel asked.

Mrs. Ramshaw sniffed and blew her nose in a handkerchief. “She’ll live, thank God. One day, she’ll be fine again.”

“May I go to her? ”

“If you wish.”

She left Daniel’s warm, safe side and climbed the stairs behind Mrs. Ramshaw. When

they entered her room, Jenny gave a warning. “Ain’t no place for a lady, Miss Clara.”

“Help me to Morrie’s side, please.”

Mrs. Ramshaw guided her to the bedside, and Clara knelt down on the rug. “I would trade places with you if I could, Morrie.” Tears clogged her throat.

“No, Miz Clara.” Morrie’s voice was weak. “He’s the most beautiful baby I ever seed.”

“I wish I could see him.”

“He be lookin’ just like my pappy. So tiny-like.”

Water trickled into a bucket, a tea cup rattled close by.

“Hold him, Miz Clara?”

Jenny swished to Clara’s side and placed a tiny bundle into her open arms. Such a light weight.

She stroked the knitted blanket she’d finished only days ago.

Cradled there, he rested in the deepest of sleeps.

Her brother. Morrie’s son. Jenny’s first grandchild.

A gift, despite the taking—a taking, despite the life.

Her fingers found his and she held his tiny palm and fingers splayed. Blood of two families mingled together.

“Morrie.” She reached for her and captured her arm. “With all my heart, Morrie, I love your boy. And in all my power, I will help you. Do you believe me?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I don’t know why.”

“You’re going to be free, Morrie.”

“I don’t rightly understand what that means.”

Jenny lifted Clara to her feet. “Morrie be needin’ to rest now. I gots her, she gonna be fine.”

Mrs. Ramshaw lifted the baby away from her and nestled him back in his mother’s arms. It wouldn’t be long before they’d have to bury the boy .

Did she memorize his features? She certainly would have. Poor, poor, Morrie.

Mrs. Ramshaw sent her downstairs again and set her and Daniel to tea making. They were both quiet. Clara trembled from having held such a tiny life, blown out like a short-wicked candle. She measured out the tea leaves slowly, yet managed to spill half of them on the table.

“Here, I’ll do it.” Daniel took the spoon from her hand.

She bent her head down to her arms and allowed him to do the simple task.

“I’ll make a disaster of a wife for you, if I can’t manage the basics.” She may as well confess it now, before he was stuck with her for good. “You know, I can’t even cook?”

The idea of ever needing to know how never crossed her mind. These tasks belonged

to Jenny. And any other house help they enslaved.

“Clara Stanton, my future wife, please understand that I love you, whatever you are, however you are. Think of how much you’ve learned in such a short time.”

He placed a cup of tea in front of her, the steam billowing its mildly tart fragrance.

“I fear I will fall far short.”

“We all do.”

“You will be disappointed in me.”

“Disappointed? You do me no honor with this charge.” He snatched her fingers and kissed them.

“You are certain you’ll have a blind wife?”

“My fiancé, I believe, sees more than most people do these days.” He came behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Morrie’s baby is gone—he—” Words strangled. How did one move on after such sorrow ?

“I know, Clara. My mother lost her last son. I know how you feel. I held my baby brother, too. Seeing his perfect form, his tiny fingers and toes—well, they made a believer out of me, if you can understand.” He carried the tea tray up upstairs, leaving her to the quiet snapping in the woodstove.

Her step-brother. Father had always wanted a son...but she hoped upon hope that he would never know that Morrie had carried his child. He didn’t deserve to have what

he wanted, for all the taking he'd done.

A bitter tear slipped down her cheek. She never wanted to see him again. Irony tussled with the thought. Most likely, she wouldn't have to.

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A day and a half later, the small group huddled together at the far edge of Mrs. Ramshaw's property.

Daniel had made a small, simple casket for the baby, Clara donned black.

Morrie clung to Jenny, her steady stream of weeping was carried to the heavens by the gusting winds that threatened to blow them away.

After Daniel spoke a few words and prayed, Jenny began to sing. Mrs. Ramshaw joined in. Clara had heard the song before many years ago.

"We are climbing Jacob's ladder,

We are climbing higher, higher..."

Their words whisked upwards, higher and higher. Clara raised her face to the sky she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, arched over them in a canopy of light. God watched them, nay, God was with them. She was sure.

Her skirts flew about her ankles and her bonnet strings whipped sideways. Urgency pressed down hard. An uneasy certainty she couldn't define. Kind of like when the sky had turned green and they'd run for cover when she was a child. Only the feeling wasn't about the weather. It was about Morrie.

She absent-mindedly touched the engagement ring on her finger. Today. They needed to marry today, and not wait a moment longer. They needed to board the train, with Morrie in tow. By morning. Without wishfully waiting to see if Morrie would be

given to her as a wedding gift .

A few hours later, she understood those feelings.

God knew when her heart was ready to listen and react.

Mrs. Ramshaw received a letter from her father.

He'd made port in North Carolina and would arrive within a few days after his letter.

If she was going to marry without his permission, it was paramount that the wedding take place immediately.

Getting Morrie out of his reach needed to happen now.

BY FOUR O'CLOCK THAT evening, an even smaller party stood by the hearth at the Baptist minister's home. Documents signed, Daniel held Clara's small hand in his own and vowed to meld his life to hers.

Mrs. Ramshaw had bedecked Clara in one of her elegant day gowns—a switch from grieving black to sunny cream. She'd tucked early crocuses amid the twists in her hair. His wife was beautiful. Stunning. He wished she could see his love for her in his eyes—wished her soul could swim in their depths.

She spoke her vows to him, taking her time. Her voice firm, but gentle. Certain, and full of love.

He kissed her then, in front of the minister and witnesses—including Mrs. Ramshaw. A warm blush crept to Clara's cheeks.

Francine sniffed and lifted a handkerchief to her eyes. Daniel hugged her, ignoring

the confusion in her eyes. She had no idea what was at stake. He'd kept her in the dark on purpose. Somehow, he knew that she mustn't know the details.

The minister shook his hand, "Congratulations, Reverend Merrick. It's been my honor to see you wed. God be with you both."

Daniel tucked Clara's hand within his arm. "We'll be off to New York for a few weeks so that Clara may meet my family. We shall return soon." This was the plan—and the public information for the community .

Daniel felt hot under his collar. To observers, such a hasty wedding meant only one thing.

And that one thing might ruin his reputation and spoil his work and future here.

He'd have to find another job. He squeezed Clara's hand.

She was worth it. Morrie was worth it. If his good name suffered, so be it.

God would guide him to exactly where he needed to be.

He laughed under his breath. God had allowed the mishap in New York to lead him to this spot here and now.

"What is it?" Clara asked.

"I've a story to tell you—on the train."

They left the minister's home and walked back to Mrs. Ramshaw's.

"Never let it be said that I couldn't supply a proper celebration." She'd sniffed. "We

shall enjoy a small feast and have cake too. And then I must keep Clara tonight, Reverend. We have a great deal of packing to do. You understand.” The old woman had winked at him. Of all things.

How many times had he blushed that day? Glad Clara hadn’t seen him.

Francine broke into his thoughts. “I am to move in with Mrs. Ramshaw for the time being, and then, dear brother, I think I must find my own way.”

“Won’t you join us?” he tried.

“I cannot return to New York. Not yet.”

She turned to go to his parsonage.

“Aren’t you going to join us?”

“I’m so sorry, I fear I must lie down. Do forgive me.” She kissed Clara on the cheek. “Welcome to the family, sister. I hope that when you meet my rambunctious little brothers, they won’t make you regret marrying into our family.”

Daniel winced. There wasn’t time to send a message. He’d show up unexpectedly, with a bride and a slave in tow. Dr. Johnson lived in a mansion—they’d certainly have room. What would they do with his request?

He gave this worry to God along with everything else. Faith meant trusting His path, His plan. They’d have His help.

The next morning, the trio stood alone at the train station.

They’d said their goodbyes at Mrs. Ramshaw’s earlier.

A few of the abolitionists had tucked bills in his hand.

For Morrie. He'd been astounded. Four hundred dollars.

What they lacked in expertise and knowledge, they made up for generously in bills and coin.

Morrie would need to hide most of it in the hem of her skirts. Such a sum could be dangerous. He squeezed his eyes shut. Freedom could be more dangerous than her captivity, if she wasn't careful.

Morrie stood with her head down, her arms empty, her shawl a poor substitute for the baby she'd lost. She'd have to play her part—in truth, she didn't know any other role.

Clara had rejected the idea that she needed to be seen bossing Morrie around during their long trek to New York.

The train pulled into the station, and he felt a sense of relief and urgency all at once. Clara tightened her grip on his arm. "It is almost time," she whispered.

Daniel observed the passengers getting off and stopped cold. Mr. Stanton stood several feet away. "Clara, Morrie," he murmured, "turn around and follow me. Quickly."

"What's wrong?" Clara paled.

He shuffled them to the side of the platform where a partition separated them from the murky steam and passengers. "Your father."

Morrie gripped her shawl and cringed.

“Has he seen us?”

“No.” His adrenaline surged. They would make it. Mr. Stanton stretched his arms and looked for his luggage. “Keep your head turned, Clara,” he whispered. He watched as Mr. Stanton ordered his slave to tote his satchels. And then, without a glance in their direction, left. “Thank God.”

They waited a few more minutes before boarding. And soon, the train pushed northward, to freedom.

CLARA FELT EVERY OUNCE of energy drained from her being.

While they’d traveled in a private compartment, it was small.

Her own darkness made it seem more compact.

And Morrie had wept silent tears the entire way.

Her new husband Daniel had remained a polite gentleman, his only endearments an occasional caress across her gloved hand or a whispered directive in her ear.

Their food basket had emptied a long time ago, and she was restless from the hours of travel. No scenes flashed by the window to help her pass the time. No books to read. In her haste, she left her knitting at Mrs. Ramshaw’s.

She admitted such aloud. “I should be doing something useful. Knitting at least. Or practicing Braille. Something.”

“You are doing something useful.” Daniel mused. “Wouldn’t you agree, Morrie?”

“Sir?” she sniffed.

“Miss Clara is being useful.” Daniel repeated.

“Miss Clara be saving my life. I reckon that’s useful to me.” Her soft voice pierced Clara’s heart.

Daniel draped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “We’re almost there.”

An hour later, Clara’s exhaustion had reached a breaking point. She nodded off in the cab that toted them to Dr. Johnson’s house—Daniel just about had to carry her in. She’d experienced his strong arms about her once before. Her senses awakened, stronger than ever. He was her husband.. .

Daniel led her by the hand into a parlor, Morrie followed. The pungent scent of cinnamon and lemon oil wafted through the air. Aromas of home. Still, she trembled at the sound of people approaching. Would they accept her?

“Daniel!” A woman’s voice—his mother? Floated towards them. “Daniel, my son. What is going on?”

“Forgive the late hour. I will explain all.” Daniel cleared his throat. “Dr. Johnson? Good to see you, sir.”

“My boy, you’ve come a long way—and with two young ladies, it seems.” His voice seemed controlled but kind.

Daniel continued, “Dr. Johnson, mother, I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Clara.”

His mother gasped. “Wife?”

Clara’s cheeks burned as she offered a formal curtsy. His wife . The thought scarcely had time to sink in. One moment they’d been burying Morrie’s baby, the

next, they'd been speaking their vows.

Dr. Johnson spoke first. "Clara? The Miss Clara Stanton you wrote to us about? How delightful." He'd written about her? Of course...the Braille books...

"Son, I would have wished to attend...I..." His mother's voice broke.

"We both married quite behind each other's backs.

For my part, I do apologize for not telling you before you left.

"She rustled forward and took one of Clara's hands.

"Welcome dear. You must be so tired from your journey. Who have you brought along?"

"This is Morrie."

Dr. Johnson wasted no time. "You know how we feel about slavery—

"Which is why we are here." Daniel answered. "We need your help."

For the next hour, Daniel explained to Dr. Johnson and his mother the reasons for Morrie's escape. His mother had shown Morrie to her room and sent up food. The poor girl had fallen fast asleep .

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Clara trembled again. A surge of fear rose at the implications of what they'd done. "I thought to ask for Morrie as a wedding gift and then set her free. Everything legal and aboveboard. But we couldn't risk it. What if he..." Tears threatened to rise. Would the pain ever go away?

Daniel shushed her gently. "Do not speak of what might have happened."

"Hmm." Dr. Johnson thrummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "No doubt, you've done the right thing. Good thing you've come in the dark of night, too. No one knows you are here."

Daniel agreed. "How is it that the boys haven't come tumbling down those steps?"

Mrs. Johnson laughed. "If they knew you were here, you wouldn't be left alone. Seeing as you arrived with a wife, it is best they are away."

"I gave them the option to board at school for the spring semester. You wouldn't know it, but those two are ready to become proper gentlemen."

"I can't believe it." Humor tinged Daniel's tired voice.

"As for how we can help you, it looks as though your lovely lady has wilted. I daresay she needs to retire. Daniel, we shall leave her to your mother's care. You're coming with me."

Daniel kissed her cheek before an unfamiliar arm looped with hers and led her through unknown twists and turns to the stairway. Daniel's mother smelled of soap

and roses.

“You’ve been through much, I believe.” Her caring voice contrasted greatly with her own mother’s.

“Not so much as Morrie.”

“Nonetheless, you’ve endured a trial. And prevailed.” Clara heard her concern. “When we use our hurts and pain to uplift another—then, we forge something greater than the scars of our circumstance. We make new marks on this world. Redeeming ones. By His stripes, we are healed. ”

His stripes...

She led Clara through a door to a cool room and set to work on a fire. “Do you need help? Here, I’ll fish out your nightgown and set it to warm. The bed is but a few steps to your left. That’s it.”

Clara felt for the mattress, relieved to find a velvety cushion awaiting her.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t wait up for Daniel. He and Dr. Johnson have a long night ahead, I’m afraid. Placing Morrie will be no small task.” Her voice was anxious.

Surely, no danger would come to her here. “She will be safe?”

“I’ve no doubt. We haven’t lost one yet.”

Clara sat on the mattress, weary to the bone.

So many in captivity. Would that they could all be freed at once.

She thought of Lewis and Jenny—little Oscar.

And the many others that populated the estate that Christian and Lucy would gain upon their marriage.

If only the nation itself would give up the idea that one man could hold another captive.

She wished she could live to see the day. If only...

“You feel the weight of it, don’t you?” Her kind voice invaded once again.

“Morrie is only one person.”

“Yes.”

“So many more...how do we do it all?”

“We don’t. We take care of one person at a time, as God sends. Only Morrie matters right now.”

“Doesn’t seem enough.” Clara stifled a yawn, her eyes gritty.

“The costs one day may indeed be high.” A loving hand stroked her cheek.
“Welcome to the family, Clara.”

Her new mother left her to the crackling fire and nightgown, and the solitude of thoughts that would race but for her exhaustion.

Sleep. And a prayer for Morrie...and Daniel for whatever task Dr. Johnson had set about.

For the first time, she thanked God for her accident.

For making her blind. If only Lucy could know the love and freedom she'd found.

She awoke the next morning to Daniel's knuckle stroking her cheek.

"You're back."

"I've been back for hours."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Because once I stoked the fire, I fell asleep taking off my shoes." He laughed.

"Right on the floor. Good thing there's a thick rug."

"Tell me. What did you do?"

"Set a little bird free. The less you know the better."

"I want to know."

"If you are ever questioned, you won't know the answer. Best keep it that way."

"She is safe?"

"Utterly."

Clara leaned back on her pillows, feeling cut off from the girl she had barely begun to love.

"What now, Daniel?" She loved saying his name. No longer was he the mysterious

Reverend Merrick. Would they make the long return trip home? Or stay a while?

“Breakfast.” He squeezed her hand.

CLARA STROKED THE PATTERN on her napkin, French knots made the centers of flowers, a satin stitch for the petals. “My only question is: what do we say? How do we answer my father upon our return?”

Daniel’s mother took a seat beside her. “Morrie has escaped. This is true, and truly all you know. You need not tell him anything else. ”

Clara released her napkin. “I wish—I wish I could have said goodbye.” Even so, she could scarcely believe the turn of events. That the Johnsons were capable of seeing Morrie to a new life, well hidden within a great secret.

They’d had a relatively peaceful journey.

Morrie had served her in every way possible.

Without a complaint or murmur. The girl had no sense of freedom, her mind still trapped by the unquestioned expectations.

Posing as her slave, there’d been no reason for anyone to suspect anything nefarious was in the works.

If she and Daniel hadn’t married, they wouldn’t have been able to travel so freely. No, indeed. Thankfully, Daniel had made it clear how much he loved her. Her heart overflowed with these new feelings.

Mrs. Johnson spoke, “She knows you care, Clara. To do what you’ve done—marrying my son sooner than planned—all to help her. She knows. I doubt

she'll ever forget.”

Daniel's hand enfolded hers again, skin against skin. She'd never get tired of his gentle affection. His protection, his never-ending patience.

“What I need to know is, how long do you plan to stay? Returning so soon after arriving will only cast suspicion upon you. And,” Mrs. Johnson paused, “you must send a message reporting Morrie's escape.”

“But she needs time to get away—time to find certain safety. I cannot report her.” Clara shivered. She didn't want to contact her father. Ever. Hard to do in the small town they called home. But soon, he'd go back to England with Mother. Gone for good.

“A compromise.” Daniel offered. “We'll tell him together. In two weeks. Come what may.”

Dr. Johnson cleared his throat. “Are you sure, son?”

“Morrie can't be caught .

Dr. Johnson clapped his hands together. “Excellent. I suggest you two enjoy a restful honeymoon. I have a quaint cottage by the sea...”

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How Clara had missed the sound of the ocean roaring and receding with the tides. If only she could see how the sun glinted off the curled tips of the rolling waves. These weeks had been the sweetest she'd ever known.

To be fully loved regardless of her disability had only added to the overflow of emotion—that God loved her for her blindness and Daniel in spite of it.

She breathed in the sea air, one last time. The first week of April had been warmer than usual, Daniel said. They'd walked the beach, collected shells, and snuggled by the fire, the two of them together.

He'd taught her how to cook a few dishes. Read to her for hours each day—the book he'd began months ago. But it was time to go back to Kentucky and finish what they'd started.

He helped her into the hack and began the journey home.

A day later, they stood on the train platform in Harrodsburg. Tired, yet fortified by their marriage. Clara didn't tremble like she used to. She was stronger. So much stronger.

"YOU RASCAL." MR. STANTON swore. "Didn't think you had it in you. Stealing my daughter from under my nose, huh?"

Hardly under his nose with the family an ocean away. Daniel had prayed, even braced himself. Mr. Stanton could be daunting. "I assure you, I didn't steal her."

Clara piped up. “Everything was proper, Father.”

“Sure about that?”

Clara turned away from his voice. Mr. Stanton smoked his cigar regardless of his daughter’s presence. Odious man. This interview wore on his bride, but she did not tremble. He released her hand and fished for the marriage certificate in his pocket when Mr. Stanton burst with laughter.

He waved the paper away. “Can’t take a joke, Reverend? Naw, I wouldn’t take her away from you. You’re stuck with her, you know. I rather hoped some fool wouldn’t be able to resist her beauty.”

“Father.” Clara fumed, her voice a sharp pin.

“Clara, dear. I only jest. Why don’t you see what Jenny has for you in the kitchen while I speak privately with your Reverend. I mean husband.”

Daniel watched his sweet wife falter. “I’ll come get you when we are finished.” He gave her shoulder a reassuring pat.

Clara put out a hand and traced her fingers along the grooves in the wainscoting. Finding her own way.

“Now, Reverend, have a seat.”

Daniel sat, wary of where the conversation might lead, and how much trouble he might find himself in.

“I expect you’ll be wanting Clara’s dowry.”

Daniel’s head snapped to look Mr. Stanton in the eye.

“Don’t get all self-righteous at me and say that you didn’t marry her for money and all that. You know as well as I do a preacher’s gotta live as well as any man, and dress like he’s ready to socialize.”

Daniel shook his head. “Sir, I—”

Mr. Stanton handed him an envelope. “It’s not the full amount. Granted, I took a good portion for Lucy and Alice, since they’re likely to make better matches, no offense.”

Daniel grudgingly took the envelope, needing to play the part. “Clara isn’t damaged goods, you know. ”

“Look. You married a blind woman. I don’t know how you two are going to manage, but that’s not any of my business.

” He leaned in, his eyes twinkling. “I’m just relieved she’s off my hands.

What with preparing for Lucy and Mr. Grant’s wedding.

No, don’t look at me like that. One day when you have daughters to marry off, you’ll understand the difficulties I’ve faced. ”

Daniel reserved his words. No point in heating up the man. Now that the conversation was on the down-side.

“Take the money and buy yourself a rig.”

He pocketed the funds. They wouldn’t keep it. No. He grinned. This money would go towards more noble things.

“Darn shame what happened about the slave—Morrie, was it?”

Daniel stopped cold. They hadn't told him yet. He swallowed.

"Clara must have been terrified. Ramshaw showed me the grave herself. Can't figure why the old woman would want the girl buried in her back yard, small as it is."

They'd seen Mrs. Ramshaw as soon as they'd arrived. She'd said nothing about this. Had she told Mr. Stanton a lie?

Daniel couldn't bring himself to correct him.

"What say you? Let Clara have any pick of the slaves, just one mind, you, as a wedding gift?"

Gracious, merciful Father.

"Thank you, Sir." Nothing more need be said.

DANIEL AND CLARA RODE the Stanton carriage back to town, to the parsonage. A young girl, nearly thirteen-years-old, hopped down from the top seat onto the dusty road. Her feet were bare and her eyes large and sad.

Jenny had whispered a name into Clara's ear.

Lewis had loaded some of Clara's old belongings into the back of the wagon and pled with her in hushed tones.

"My girl." He'd said. "Be good to my girl." His voice had quaked.

As though he knew the hard path to freedom his girl would take.

As though he wondered if he'd see her again on this side of heaven.

Mrs. Ramshaw had been pacing his kitchen all afternoon, awaiting their return. “What did he say? Does he suspect?”

Daniel removed his gloves and tossed his hat to the table. “Did you lie to him about Morrie?”

She looked at him in wonder, her eyes shimmering. “That man. He never really listens.” She shook her head. “Jenny muttered something about a baby and pointed to the grave.” She huffed. “And that is all that was said.”

Clara removed her bonnet, no doubt as bone weary as he. They hadn’t stopped to rest. Both, anxious to get the first meeting over with. “He made an assumption?”

Mrs. Ramshaw uncovered a plate of biscuits and ham and set a jug of tea on the table. “Seemed a mite relieved, he did. I reckon your mother doesn’t fancy seeing his lookalikes running around the farm.”

“She’d be mortified if she knew.” Clara sank into the chair next to him.

Were people forever a moveable chess piece, each one, a pawn to strike and power to gain?

He wondered what it was like for Clara’s mother.

To be chosen as an asset rather than for love.

To raise her daughters to fulfill the same twisted idea. ..

Daniel took a bite of ham biscuit. “Where is Francine?”

“Didn’t I tell you? She left for New York a day before you arrived home. Said she couldn’t stay away a moment longer. A letter came for her—from a Mr. Crawley.

Must've made her right happy. Mind you, I don't approve of single women traveling alone."

CLARA FELT AROUND THE new surroundings—it would take a week or so to get her bearings. Meanwhile, she used the walking stick Daniel had carved for her to get around. Where was he ?

He caught her around the waist and pulled her into his lap. "Not so fast, dear." He kissed her ear, her cheeks, her lips. I have a wedding present for you."

"You?"

"Indeed, I do."

Wedding presents had poured in when they'd returned. Mrs. Ramshaw had whispered among the ladies of their tender romance. The pair had the entire town swooning. Cakes and food had arrived first, then a bevy of gifts. "We've enough doilies to cover every solid surface of this place."

"Come with me." Daniel took her hand in his and led her to the front door and outside and placed both of her hands on warm flesh. A hoof stamped the ground, a gentle neigh greeted her ears. "Your horse, my love. Here's Esther. She's yours again."

Clara leaned her head against the beast's warm neck and sobbed, stroking the creature with loving hands. How her soul had longed for another run! One more chance to feel the earth speed past. One more chance to run with the wind. For a time all had gone dark. But then, light appeared.

She couldn't stop weeping. She turned from her horse and buried herself in Daniel's chest. "Thank you. Thank you."

He heaved a great breath. Did he weep too?

She pulled away from his chest and wiped her eyes with his handkerchief.

She blinked. Something... She blinked again.

No. Yes, something was there. Before her face.

Buttons. Shirt buttons. Her fingers touched them.

Her own hand, touching her husband's buttons. But more than that...much more.

"Daniel..." Her voice rasped.

"My love?"

"I can see." Blurred lines cleared. A hint of blackness remained around the edges of her left eye, but the right one cleared.. .

He cupped his hands around her face and drew her chin up. To see him. "Clara! "

Her beloved stroked her cheek. Tears blurred her vision again. She swiped them away. My, he was handsome. Exactly as she'd imagined.

"Clara! "

"AND JESUS STOOD STILL , and called them, and said, what will ye that I shall do unto you? They said unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened..." Matthew 20:32-